

HELVETE A JOURNAL OF BLACK METAL THEORY : ISSUE 3 BLEEDING BLACK NOISE



HELVETE  
A JOURNAL OF BLACK METAL THEORY

*Issue 3*  
*Bleeding Black Noise*

Autumn 2016

Helvete is an open-access electronic and print journal dedicated to continuing the mutual blackening of Metal and theory inaugurated by the Black Metal Theory Symposia. Not to be confused with Metal studies, music criticism, ethnography, or sociology, Black Metal theory is a speculative and creative endeavor, one which seeks ways of thinking that “count” as Black Metal events—and, indeed, to see how Black Metal might count as thinking. Theory of Black Metal, and Black Metal of theory. Mutual blackening.



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## PREFACE

Amelia Ishmael

*Le harsh noise, c'est le chaos volontaire, la crasse en liberté, le vide exagéré par la violence électrique. Le harsh noise est un trou noir. . . une extrémité horrible. [. . .] né au bout du siècle de l'information, en essayant de faire sans elle, en s'incarnant en poussière exagérée des musiques électriques, en cendre de mort de musique sacrifiée, annulation saturée.*

—Olivier Lamm

*[Harsh noise is deliberate chaos, filth set free, the void exaggerated by electric violence. Harsh noise is a black hole. . . a horrible extreme. [. . .] born at the end of the information century, trying to do without it, being embodied in the exaggerated dust of electric music, in the ashes of sacrificed music, in saturated cancellation.]*

Black Metal Theory is noise. Lacking one clear manifesto or position, it fails to become an elite circle. It is amplified and transmitted electronically: through instruments, lo-fi recordings, internets, and print-on-demand publishers... yet rather than a clear direction of progress we glean only its subversive raw dissonance, disruptions, animalistic screams, resonating disturbances, high-pitched feedback, primitive growls, and its atmospheric statics, hisses, and drones. Black Metal Theory refuses to be hi-fi. It quenches its sonic thirsts from primordial-ditch stews that resemble the dark sludge of recently melted snowfall—pristine white flakes transmuted into a tumultuously sexy and delicious mixture of trash and dirt and ash and poison that swirls and splashes in ditches before seeping into the underground. Our ears drink this disharmonious black bile and our bodies suspend in its intoxicating formless complexities.



This third issue of *Helvete* focuses on the sonic aspects of Black Metal, specifically its interactions with Noise—the interruptions, creations, and destructions of signals. Its title, *Bleeding Black Noise*, is a revision of Steven Parrino’s statement, “My relation between Rock and visual art: I will bleed for you.” Here the editor replaces Rock with Noise, and celebrates the Bleeding as a release of the Black Noise—raw energy and formless potential. The enclosed textual essays and visual portfolios discuss and experimentally demonstrate sonic and conceptual feedback, as well as the way that black noise works through feedback as a process, resonating as background hums or drones, and cascading in foregrounded screams.

My gratitude goes to all of the artists and writers who contributed to this issue—Gast Bouschet and Nadine Hilbert, Faith Coloccia, Bagus Jalang, Alessandro Keegan, Max Kuiper, Kyle McGee, Susanne Pratt, Simon Pröll, Michaël Sellam, Nathan Snaza, and Bert Stabler—as well as to Owen Coggins, Joseph Nechvatal, David Prescott-Steed, and Jason J. Wallin for their advisory roles.

ALESSANDRO KEEGAN

*candle soot and white gouache on paper, 2014*









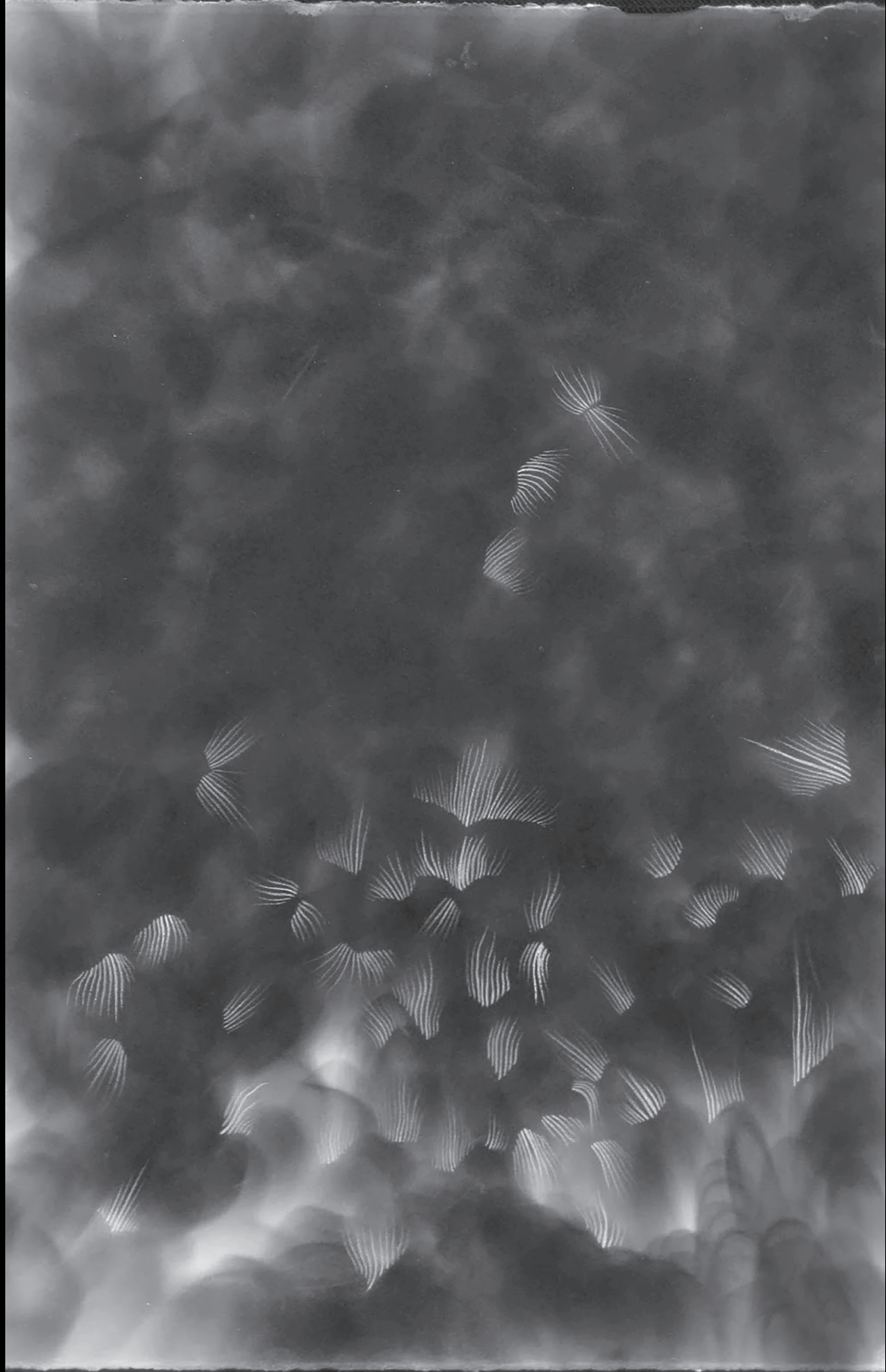






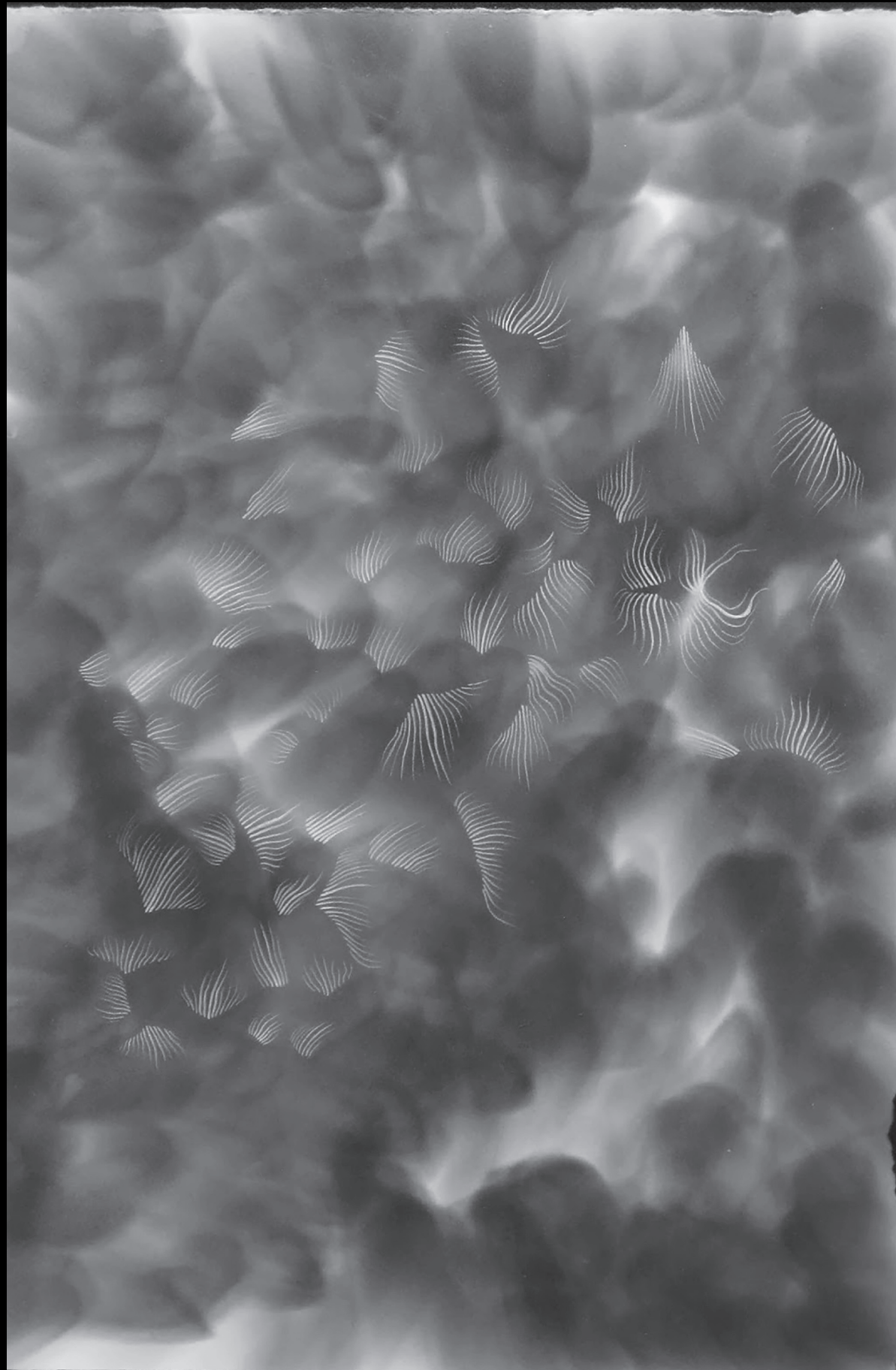














# “BLACK-NOISE”

## The Throb of the Anthropocene

Susanne Pratt

*In emergency, what do we hear, and how?  
When time's of the essence, what sounds keep us honest?  
What roils our ears in the imperative “now”?  
If sound at heart is nothing but a commotion of air,  
what happens to hearing when all is upended, in despair?*

—Hillel Schwartz<sup>1</sup>

*Black-noise phenomena govern natural and unnatural catastrophes, like floods, droughts, bear markets, and various outrageous outages, such as those of electrical power. Because of their black spectra, such disasters often come in clusters.*

—Manfred Schroeder<sup>2</sup>

Due to the dominance of coal within our energy systems there is a blackening: a blackening of stock markets, a blackening of landscapes, a blackening of the air. Drilling, blasting, heavy trucks, crushers, excavators, coal trains, bulldozers, front-end loaders, and the throb of machinery all create a black noise. For those living by coal mining sites, these are the dark vibrations of night and the infrasound of day. But, for the large majority of us—an “us” removed from the immediate proximity of the extraction and manufacturing of coal—these are distant noises. Yet, even though the mining may be out of hearing range, we still experience these noises and vibrations in other ways; the practices that generate these disturbances are impacting the climate in chaotic ways that we both see and feel.

With my blackened hands on these pages, I reflect here on “Black-Noise,”<sup>3</sup> an installation I created in 2013, in response to open-cut coal mining in Australia,

specifically within the Hunter Valley region of New South Wales.<sup>4</sup> The installation was placed at Kudos Gallery at University of New South Wales, Australia, from 18–22 June 2013 and consisted of a row of four large aluminium trays filled with a slurry of coal dust and water lying a few inches over the floor, set on top of subwoofer speakers which blasted inaudible infrasound noise and vibrations into the slurry. The sounds emitted from the speakers were generated from recordings, collected from open-cut coal mining sites in the Hunter. The vibrations emanated from the speakers moved through the trays and rippled and collided on the surface of the coal-dust slurry, causing the coal dust to settle into patterns—visualizing the black noise.

This essay uses the installation “Black-Noise” alongside discussions of noise within twentieth-century art and music, namely Black Metal, to explore the potential of noise to act as a productive force—not as a means of redemption, but rather as a tool for raising generative problems. I will first outline how noise has been used within art to emphasise the materiality or presence of the medium and the inherent mutability of communication. Then I will describe the installation “Black-Noise” in relation to its development through field research in the Hunter Valley. Next I will contrast Black Metal, specifically work by the Eco-Black Metal band Wolves in the Throne Room (WITTR), with the installation “Black-Noise” to discuss ways in which noise can force a system to rearrange, to become more complex, from responding to and mixing with the noise.<sup>5</sup> Finally, I will conclude with a conception of black noise that acts as a proposition for inhabiting and reimagining mined and undermined landscapes—practices that do not state how things should be, but disrupt existing practices and imaginaries that blacken our hands, scream in our heads, and enact worlds.

## I. “NOISE IS THE FOREST OF EVERYTHING”<sup>6</sup>

*The existence of noise implies a mutable world through an unruly intrusion of an other, an other that attracts difference, heterogeneity, and productive confusion; moreover, it implies a genesis of mutability itself.*

—Douglas Kahn<sup>7</sup>

Noise in twentieth-century art arose out of the ashes of a century of mechanized impulses interlacing into a century of information drives. Luigi Russolo’s manifesto, *The Art of Noises* (1913) was one of the first modernist reformations of noise as art.<sup>8</sup> He reformulated an orchestra to perform industrial and urban noises, bringing dissonance into the traditional “purity” of music, albeit mainly mimetic noises, noises which copied industrial sounds. His emphasis was on the celebration of the city, its noises, and industrialisation, focusing attention to the tonal and acoustic qualities of noise in art. His purpose was to widen the range of sound within the orchestra by drawing on sounds in modern life. Expanding the language of music to “a more complex polyphony and a

greater variety of instrumental tones and colouring” to build “noise-sound” in order to “excite and stir our sensibility.”<sup>9</sup> Also following a mimetic path to expand the traditional musical vocabulary were the found sounds of Arseny Avraamov’s composition *Symphony of Factory Sirens* (1922), wherein machine guns, car horns, and factory sirens (as both sounds of war and of the industrial city) were used to perform traditional French anthems. Russolo and Avraamov’s works expanded what constituted music by introducing what was previously conceived of as noise into the traditional aesthetic sphere of music, but they did not necessarily shift noise to emphasise the presence of the medium.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, John Cage used noise to highlight the presence of the medium with his infamous three-movement composition *4’ 33”* (1952), in which noises from the audience, such as their own shuffles and coughs, became the musical event; the pianist, David Tudor, sat at the piano without playing a key during the piece’s three movements. The medium, the space in which music occurs, was amplified. It entangled desirable sound with undesirable noise and strained acceptance, leading Paul Hegarty to refer to this work as the beginning of noise music, a music composed of chance or accidental sounds.<sup>11</sup>

A further example of noise that emphasizes the presence of the medium was Pierre Schaeffer’s development of *musique concrète*, a type of electroacoustic music—“a vocabulary of sonic expression opposed to the wild transcendentalisms of the ‘musique abstraite’ against which it positions itself, constructing music from concrete sounds that precede their organization rather than vice versa.”<sup>12</sup> In his composition “Five Studies of Noises” (1948), Schaeffer curated a range of different sound recordings taken from the environment, such as the sounds of locomotives, and changed them with various forms of electroacoustic manipulation; he stripped the sound from its environment and the entities that produced it to create what he referred to as “sonic events.”<sup>13</sup> Which, as the sound scholar Sean Higgins argues, challenged the traditional transcendental music model, for Schaeffer “utilised recording technology to organise from the noisy bottom upward rather than from a transcendental music downward.”<sup>14</sup>

Drawing on information theory, the sound scholar Douglas Kahn has expanded notions of noise within art and music, describing one aspect of noise as “that constant grating sound generated by the movement between the abstract and the empirical.”<sup>15</sup> For Kahn, noise can mean the empirical (it is of the world), but he points towards the troubling of the binary of abstraction and empiricism in the communication of noise.<sup>16</sup> He writes “when noise itself is being communicated. . . it no longer remains inextricably locked into empiricism but is transformed into an abstraction of another noise. . . . noise is an abstraction of sound.”<sup>17</sup> This layering, where noise cancels noise, is what Kahn addresses in his articulation of the “*specifics* of sound,” ways of acknowledging the amplification and suppression inherent to the use of noise in the arts.<sup>18</sup> The amplification and suppression of sound is also evident in the curation of noise in spaces

of art, “[s]ound work makes us aware of the continuing emphasis upon division and partition that continues to exist in the most radically revisable or polymorphous gallery space, because sound spreads and leaks.”<sup>19</sup> In this article I do not explore the specificities of noise in relation to exhibition environments, for scholarship in this area Steven Connor provides a valuable discussion of noise and the display of art in “Ears Have Walls: On Hearing Art.”<sup>20</sup>

To elaborate how noise grates between the abstract and the empirical, Kahn draws on the French philosopher Michel Serres’s development of noise within information theory that acknowledges noise as part of the process of transmission.<sup>21</sup> Both build on the pioneering scholarship within information theory by Claude Shannon.<sup>22</sup> Shannon showed that any message always contains “noise,” where noise can refer to whatever causes interferences with the communication of the message. Take for example two people speaking over the phone, the signal could be weak and cut out, or traffic sounds from the street could muffle what one of the people is saying, but these noises are filtered by the people communicating to each other, abstracted, so that communication of verbal signals can occur. In other words, to create meaning the noises such as traffic sounds are filtered or abstracted to enable communication.<sup>23</sup> However, as Caleb Kelly (drawing on Serres) writes, “noise is all around us and we are immersed in it constantly; in fact without it there can be no communication. It is the ground from which all communication is drawn and it is a constant in that communication.”<sup>24</sup> So, although noise is constant, there is a tension between noise as unwanted (something that we filter and choose certain sounds from), and noise as productive. Drawing on information theory, N. Katherine Hayles states that there is “the recognition that noise can sometimes cause a system to reorganize at a higher level of complexity.”<sup>25</sup> However, Hayles contends “[w]hether noise will have a positive or negative effect on systemic organization depends on the stability of the system, the kind of feedback loops at work, the amount and kind of noise injected, and when the injection occurs.”<sup>26</sup> What do notions of noise mean for future prospects in relation to mining and markets, what types of interferences are evoked, what forms of organization?

Building on discussions of noise in information theory, the economist Fischer Black proposed noise as an economic theory for understanding pricing, in which interferences in pricing (such as hype) are accounted for by the interferences in information (i.e., the opposite of noise).<sup>27</sup> Noise (in other words, disagreements in what is accurate information, or differences in how to interpret information) is necessary for speculative trading, as disagreements drive the desire to trade. Black noise is a particular variant of noise within financial markets that can mean a total lack of noise, or silence—“silence” here refers to noise or interference that is unable to be entirely measured or heard yet still causes impacts or affects. In other words, black noise within financial markets indicates disagreements about the future—albeit disagreements that are hard to measure. Similarly, Eco-Black Metal—the variant of Black Metal that I fold into the

discussion of black noise in this article—is a form of noise that represents a disagreement with future prospects.

## II. CARBON VALLEY

In March 2013, I conducted field research in the Hunter Valley, including in-depth interviews with people living by open-cut coalmines. The Hunter Valley has the greatest concentration of coal mining and coal combustion in Australia,<sup>28</sup> causing it to be renamed “Carbon Valley” by local media.<sup>29</sup> Living in Sydney, I had little previous understanding of what the everyday impacts of coal mining are on the communities that live surrounded by mining sites. I wanted to explore what living with mines meant—what it means to be encroached on by mines. What it means both in terms of the health of people living in the Hunter and the health of the environment that they co-exist with.

Deidre Olofsson, an electrician living in the Hunter, drove me around the different mining sites surrounding her home. Before meeting her I had looked at her home on Google Maps, zooming in to her home and the surrounding mining sites, but standing beside the sites was another experience entirely. The mines appeared to almost merge into each other at points; the sounds blurred the edges of the mine sites due to the rumble of machines. For Olofsson, the sounds of mining constantly circled our conversation. “Can you hear that?” she would ask at different points along our journey around different mine sites. She spoke of how the sounds travel at night, the blasts that she believes are causing cracks in her house, and the infrasound. Infrasound is noise that is silent to human hearing, sounds at very low frequencies, below 20 Hz. Thunder, icebergs calving, and waves on a beach all produce infrasound—so do trucks, trains, and bulldozers. Another resident, Wendy Bowman, also spoke to me of the impact of infrasound and noise, telling me anecdotes about the migraines and headaches people would experience, and how these ailments didn’t occur when they were away from the Hunter.

Provoked by Olofsson and Bowman’s reflections on their experience of infrasound, I investigated this phenomenon further. The health effect of technological sources of infrasound and low-frequency noise is a contentious issue.<sup>30</sup> Literature on this topic tends to focus on noise from wind turbines more so than coal mining, but due to limited literature on either, the two have been combined—as they are deemed comparable—in order to assess the health impacts of infrasound.<sup>31</sup> One review of literature that looked at the health effects of infrasound from wind turbines concluded that audible noise and infrasound can cause annoyance, for example due to sleep disturbance, but infrasound does not cause significant physiological impacts on health, such as nausea as a direct result of infrasound; rather, the stress and annoyance is due to unwanted exposure to noise.<sup>32</sup> However, a more recent review stated that “there is some evidence of symptoms

in patients exposed to wind turbine noise,” symptoms such as vertigo and ear pain; they concluded that further research is required.<sup>33</sup>

Although there is inconclusive and insufficient peer-reviewed literature on the topic, particularly long-term health effects of infrasound,<sup>34</sup> laboratory tests have demonstrated that people exposed to infrasound suffer physical and mental effects, such as feeling unwell,<sup>35</sup> feeling headachy and fretful,<sup>36</sup> experiencing a decline in mental performance,<sup>37</sup> and activation of the auditory cortex, which could lead to negative health effects.<sup>38</sup> Nuno A. A. Castelo Branco and Mariana Alves-Pereira have shown that long-term exposure to high intensities of low-frequency sound and infrasound can lead to vibroacoustic disease.<sup>39</sup> People with this disease develop abnormally high levels of collagen and elastin, and their blood vessels can thicken, resulting in a greater risk of depression and tachycardia. The World Health Organization (WHO) has also identified low-frequency sound as an environmental health concern.<sup>40</sup> I include these references here not to say that exposure to infrasound due to mining is a definitive cause for ill health, but to acknowledge that infrasound is a complex issue.

There is a range of reports in Australian newspapers that describe individuals who feel that infrasound from mining, particularly from large mining blasts and use of heavy diesel machinery, has caused negative health effects, such as headaches and nausea.<sup>41</sup> For example, Lance Beatty, who lives near a coal mine in the vicinity of Mudgee, in the same state (NSW) as the Hunter Valley, described infrasound as: “That hum that’s inside the head is what you will be aware as infrasound as being [sic], that hum cannot be eradicated. You can’t insulate against it. There’s nothing you can do to your room, your house. You can put a pillow over your head, earplugs in your ears, and nothing will stop it.”<sup>42</sup> The “hum that’s inside the head” to which Beatty refers is caused by the capacity of infrasound to cause resonance. In physics, resonance describes the event when a formerly still body responds to a vibrating body with movement. According to the *Oxford Dictionary*, resonance (physics) is defined as “the reinforcement or prolongation of sound by reflection from a surface or by the synchronous vibration of a neighbouring object.”<sup>43</sup> Resonance, or the vibratory phenomena of low-frequency noise, has been widely used within music; the sound scholar R. Murray Schafer writes “the vibratory effects of high-intensity, low-frequency noise, which have the power to ‘touch’ listeners, had first been experienced in thunder, then the church, where the bombardon of the organ had made the pews wobble under the Christians, and finally had been transferred to the cacophonies of the eighteenth-century factory.”<sup>44</sup> Further describing how “[l]ocalization of the sound sources is more difficult with low-frequency sounds, and music stressing such sounds is both darker in quality and more directionless in space. Instead of facing the sound source the listener seems immersed in it.”<sup>45</sup>

With these differing notions of sound in mind, I recorded the noises: the trains, the blasts, the trucks, the dozers. I recorded these sounds at the sides of the road, at mining sites, at train stations, and at homes. I wanted to build up a textured auditory



experience to match the visceral stories I heard. But I also wanted to make this noise tangible, to show how it shifted and moved material—noise isn't just something that happens in the background without material consequences—I wanted to show its affective qualities, what it amplifies and suppresses.

### III. RESONATING WITH BLACK NOISE

Living in Australia, I am complicit with the burden of coal and black noise throbbing through the financial veins of this country I call home. “Black-Noise” is my material investigation into the bodily burdens of coal mining, the burdens on the bodies of humans, and also on the bodies of the “more-than-humans” we share ecosystems with—birds, forests, coal, rivers, etc.<sup>46</sup> The installation curled itself into being in response to the constant waves of apathy, disgust, and mourning that I feel daily—the feelings which surge with each news report of increasing fire risks brought on by changes in climate, the blackening of skies from smog pollution, or stories of toxic tailings that leach into waterways. “Black-Noise” explores how noise, often an invisible phenomenon, can be made visible through material interferences that are responding to audio vibrations. In the first instance it highlights the way noise from mining sites is a very real concern and source of ill health for neighbouring occupants. (I hadn't considered this in my initial exploration; I thought that the dust and its impact on air and water quality would be the primary issues that people would speak to me about.) In the second instance noise acts as a metaphor for other seemingly invisible forces that are impossible to fully quantify—black noises that nonetheless have significant material effects, such as stock markets and climate change.

The term practice-led research is used to describe the research conducted within this article. Practice-led research (and the associated terms practice-as-research and practice-based research) is used here to encompass both outcomes and practice: First, it proposes that creative works, such as an art installation, are a research outcome; second, it argues that creative practice—including the process of producing creative works, the documentation of the work, and the theorization of it—generates insights and can be recorded and analysed to produce innovative methodological and theoretical contributions to knowledge.<sup>47</sup> A practice-led approach produces a different, specific form of knowledge, which Professor Barbara Bolt refers to as “praxical knowledge”<sup>48</sup>—“a knowing that arises through handling materials in practice.”<sup>49</sup> Professor Brad Haseman, describing the production of creative work in relation to research, highlights that people producing creative works “tend to ‘dive in,’ to commence practicing to see what emerges.”<sup>50</sup> This is characteristic of the approach I took, blackening my hands, interfering to see what would unfold in the different layers of noise.

Within “Black-Noise” the coal slipped between the patterns of sound that carved out ridges in the water; thus the dust that collected at the bottom of the trays recorded the

events unfolding within the water. The coal-dust slurry in the trays operated as intermediary, as interface; the trays placed material weight between the sound of mining and the bodies of people who experienced the installation. Real-time fluctuations in noise level interacted with the material on the trays, shifting the coal and water; the noise constantly changed the coal-dust patterns on the floor of the tray, a means of live recording and aesthetically transcribing the turbulent impacts of coal. The metal at the bottom of the tray glistened through, a mirror of sorts overlaid with the noise of coal mining turned into material patterns. The patterns on the trays emerged as new topologies of “naturecultures;”<sup>51</sup> they could have been topological grey-scale images of estuaries, or the coal sludge that collects on tin roofs of houses near mine sites before running off into household water tanks.

The noises that I recorded from the coal-mining sites and the parts of the Hunter Valley affected by the impacts of coal mining are intended as representations of the forms of noise that are a disagreement with future prospects. However, rather than disagreements about financial worth, the disagreements are about future prospects of environmental health. The installation was a form of noise that explored absences, silences, what is being destroyed, most significantly the loss of connections within, and between, different ecologies due to the expansion of coal mining, such as the destruction of wetlands. I used infrasound (sound beyond human hearing) and the materials coal and water as a way to speak of the environmental health impacts of coal mining that concerned the people I interviewed, such as noise, contamination of air through coal dust, and negative impacts on water. In particular, I was interested in the affective modalities of infrasound, its ability to cause anxiety and the notion of *sympathetic resonance*—a phenomenon whereby materials and people vibrate in response, with harmonic likeness, to another entity emitting vibrations, noise.

The use of sound, particularly low-frequency sounds such as infrasound, to induce sympathetic resonance is not unique to the installation “Black-Noise,” it is evident in a range of art practices. For example, the artist Maryanne Amacher describes “the third ear” in relation to her work “Synaptic Island” (1999, *Sound Characters*, Tzadik)—sounds manifested inside the ear due to resonant properties, producing unique vibrations within the listener, “Here, noise vibrates both the architecture of rooms as well as the ear canal, situating a listener within a spatiality that penetrates as well as absorbs the body.”<sup>52</sup> The artist Anish Kapoor utilised infrasound in his installation *Anxious* (2012, exhibited at Lisson Gallery 2014), which consisted of a room with sound played at low frequency and modulating intensities, intended to make people feel anxious. “Black-Noise” also drew on experiments with resonance performed within the field of cymatics.<sup>53</sup> Cymatics studies wave phenomena, particularly the way sound is made visible through material mediums, such as sand on a metal plate.

“Black-Noise” was also in part materially inspired by Philippe Parreno’s installation “Water Lilies” (2012) at the Fondation Beyeler, Basel, Switzerland, in which he used

small speakers at the bottom of a pond to generate sonic water lilies—the sonic vibrations causing ripples reminiscent of the shape of water lilies on the water’s surface.<sup>54</sup> Like “Water Lilies,” an auditory sympathetic resonance also played out in “Black-Noise” on the materials of the tray: the coal and water resonated with the sound emanating from the speakers underneath the tray, causing patterns to form on the bottom of the tray. The installation, can also be compared to Carsten Nicolai’s artworks which use infrasound, such as “Wellenwanne” (2000) and “Milch” (2000), in which he used low-frequency sounds to create wave patterns within water and milk (respectively), in a manner that Antonio Somaini refers to as “‘tactile’ hearing,” emphasising the material dimensions of sound.<sup>55</sup> To explore ecological tensions posed in the installation “Black-Noise” and to elucidate the role that noise plays in tending to these tensions, I now turn to Eco-Black Metal.

#### IV. “THE SPECULATIVE GLORY OF THE PROBLEMATIC”<sup>56</sup>

Eco-Black Metal, an off-branch of United States Black Metal (USBM), differs significantly from the ‘80s Metal that gave rise to the genre—the first wave of Black Metal—and also from the Satanic sounds emanating from Norwegian woods that characterised the second wave of Black Metal in the early ‘90s. It was when Black Metal spread to the United States, particularly the Cascadian region of the US, that the form became adapted to an eco-conscious position, responding to the new landscapes it became fused with. In contrast to the depictions of a vengeful nature contained in Scandinavian Black Metal, Eco-Black Metal incorporates elements of mourning and protest, rallying against the industrial expansion that is destroying ecosystems one power station and gas well at a time.

Wolves in the Throne Room (WITTR) are the poster band for this shift in both sound and ethical consciousness; they were the first to start referring to themselves with the term Eco-Black Metal. WITTR adopt a desire for a pre-modern pagan era, unmediated by technology, which never existed. They abandon the embrace of Satan, as proffered by Black Metal kvltists, of second-wave Black Metal. Hence WITTR are often placed on the periphery of Black Metal; as Scott Wilson remarks, they are “the band that true Black Metal ‘kvltists’ love to hate.”<sup>57</sup> Eco-Black Metal, as conjured by WITTR, mourns a “mythic, pastoral world.” WITTR describe this sentiment in an interview they conducted in 2006:

To us, the driving impulse of [Black Metal] is more about deep ecology than anything else and can best be understood through the application of eco-psychology. Why are we sad and miserable? Because our modern culture has failed—we are all failures. The world around us has failed to sustain our humanity, our spirituality. The deep woe inside black metal is about fear—that

we can never return to the mythic, pastoral world that we crave on a deep subconscious level. Black Metal is also about self loathing, for modernity has transformed us, our minds, bodies and spirit, into an alien life form; one not suited to life on earth without the mediating forces of technology, culture and organized religion. We are weak and pitiful in our strength over the earth—in conquering, we have destroyed ourselves. Black Metal expresses disgust with humanity and revels in the misery that one finds when the falseness of our lives is revealed.<sup>58</sup>

What WITTR express folds back into the feelings I raised earlier that I experienced in relation to the implications of coal mining expansion in Australia—a sadness at the failure of modern development to support the flourishing of species, and a certain amount of self-loathing at my own culpability in this blackening and material transformation. In part “Black-Noise” can be said to be a revelry “in the misery that one finds when the falseness of our lives is revealed,” a revelry in the noise, a delight in the turbulence of the materials in the installation, the coal and water colliding together, constantly evolving patterns forming on the bottom of the trays. The infrasound generates a space within which to dwell in this disgust, distress, and loathing, while simultaneously mourning the environment from which these sounds were extracted and which the installation reflected upon.

The term that echoes this type of melancholy is “solastalgia,” created by the environmental philosopher, Glenn Albrecht, to combine notions of nostalgia with distress.<sup>59</sup> Solastalgia links the “ecosystem distress and human distress” that he saw occurring to residents within the Hunter Valley.<sup>60</sup> He describes it as “the pain or sickness caused by the loss or lack of solace and the sense of isolation connected to the present state of one’s home and territory.”<sup>61</sup> Albrecht writes that solastalgia “is the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where one resides and that one loves is under immediate assault (physical desolation).”<sup>62</sup> Standing beside Olofsson, as she pointed towards her home, I felt the black noises. The hills and homes Olofsson pointed to are not the hills I grew up on, nor the homes I grew up in, but they are part of a landscape I am implicated in. This fusing of distress, of ecosystems and humans, is what the installation “Black-Noise” attempted to capture, distress at the expansion of coal that is eviscerating this landscape; guilt, knowing that I am part of this; and apathy at what is to be done. What are these landscapes now? What is it that we refer to when we refer to ecosystem, or to nature? Questions that I also hear within the noises of WITTR.

The desire to return to a pastoral “natural” world, as expressed by WITTR, is naïve. Industrialisation, including the practices and impacts of mining, demonstrate that “nature” is not separate from culture: it is not an “over there” issue, it is entangled with and performed by technologies, economic structures, values, legal systems, desires...

perhaps “ecology without nature,” to follow Timothy Morton,<sup>63</sup> is a better notion than nature, or what Bruno Latour refers to as “naturecultures.”<sup>64</sup> The naming of our current geological epoch as the Anthropocene testifies to the entangled interferences of humans and the environment. The atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen was first to propose the Anthropocene to mark the dramatic human-induced changes which Crutzen feels has heralded a new geologic time in which humans’ impact on earth’s atmosphere is markedly evident.<sup>65</sup> Crutzen and his colleagues have put forward the term to encompass the degradation of ecosystem services, population growth, and resource consumption.<sup>66</sup> They are concerned that, throughout the majority of the world, greenhouse gasses are not being significantly mitigated or reduced to correspond with increasing demand in order to prevent speculated climate-tipping points.<sup>67</sup>

A feature of Eco-Black Metal is how it dwells in these contradictions: it articulates a reality in which civilization is condemned due to its indulgence in technological consumption; yet at the same time the music relies on modern technologies. As WITTR state in an interview: “I don’t think it is a natural sound at all. It is really the sound of paradox, ambiguity, and confusion, being caught between two worlds that cannot be reconciled.”<sup>68</sup> Clarifying this position WITTR declare, “I remember a common line against rioters trashing the Nike store in downtown Seattle. There was a famous picture of some black-clad kid smashing the Nike sign, but zoom in and... ah-haa!! He’s wearing Nike sneakers! I say, who fucking cares? Catharsis is our objective, not a lilly-white [sic] and guilt-free existence. We are all hypocrites and failures.”<sup>69</sup> The use of the term “catharsis” is interesting here. Rather than transcendence or redemption, catharsis can point towards the filtering of emotions with art, where noise becomes an empirical grounding in contradictions, bringing forward repressed emotions, working through them. Hence catharsis, as I interpret it here, is a means of experiencing what is ignored, or repressed, rather than a tool for absolving guilt.<sup>70</sup>

The materials I used within the installation “Black-Noise” also pose contradictions—similar to WITTR’s decry of a world that has “rejected the earth... for the baubles of modernity,”<sup>71</sup> yet use modernity’s baubles to create art—because the materials I used are implicated in mining: the metal trays were mined, the parts for the speakers were mined. To be sure, it is not the mining process essentially that I am critiquing, but rather the contemporary methods and their scale, frequencies, and intensities. That there is no aesthetic autonomy with which to speak about politics and society without also being implicated in them has been well established<sup>72</sup> (contra-modernist art writers such as Clement Greenberg and Roger Fry who viewed “art” and “life” as separate spheres).<sup>73</sup> Yet, the “free market” has not also followed suit; many aspects of society still ripple to the economic frequencies of neo-liberal imperatives as if these frequencies are autonomous from the material realities that enact them.

What is at stake in highlighting the contradictions of making noise, within the present moment, that critiques and mourns environmental degradation while

simultaneously being embedded in the technologies that have contributed to enacting this demise? Niall Scott suggests, “[t]he black metal event is a confession without need of absolution, redemption.”<sup>74</sup> He proposes that it is a form of sin eating, like the ritual of eating burial cakes, whereby someone from the community is paid to eat a loaf of bread, representing sin, as a means of redeeming the recently deceased, but for Scott there is no redemption. In a similar vein, Morton describes WITTR as a “musical antihistamine that enables humans to not have an allergic reaction to working at the depth necessary for retracing our broken coexistence with all beings.”<sup>75</sup> It is Black Metal’s capacity to dwell in paradox, to use sonorous means to go deep, to explore the contradictions and breaks in ontological thought that have produced such fissures in resource consumption and production of toxic bodies. Catharsis not in the sense of returning to a pure state, but of working through practices, experiences, emotions, and “staying with the trouble.”<sup>76</sup>

This is the black noise, noise as highlighting materialities, the mediums through which sound travels, the orders and structures, practices, and desires that contribute to environmental degradation. Feeling them, hearing them [infrasound in black noise]. One could say “Black-Noise” and Eco-Black Metal are aesthetics as a form of ecosystem eulogy—the creation of noise to mourn a “nature” that is lost, that never existed in the first place<sup>77</sup>—and as a site from which to spur action, a cathartic that is dark, destructive, and dwelling in contradiction—a sentiment expressed by WITTR in their statement that “[Black Metal] is about destruction, destroying humanity; destroying ones [sic] own self in an orgy of self loathing and hopelessness.”<sup>78</sup> Ben Woodard states that the key issue of Black Metal’s “inhumanity” is “the questionable place from which that void-loving misanthropy emerges, the core from which the disintegration of the human is loosed.”<sup>79</sup> Noise and the interference patterns inherent to noise—patterns that demonstrate how communication and relations rely on the mediums through which they travel—open up the tensions of nostalgia and disintegration of the human.

What these contradictions allude to is a point elucidated by Nicola Masciandaro and Reza Negarestani in *Hideous Gnosis*: “The internal duplicities of Black Metal toward death, (anti-) humanism and extremities are the consequence of such problematical nature which requires means of investigation and commentary other than pejorative, purifying and absolving. Where other musical genres are constantly tempted towards justification and purification (musical, philosophical, aesthetical, etc.), Black Metal tends to bask in *the speculative glory of the problematic*.”<sup>80</sup> The psychologist and economist Per Espen Stoknes suggests that we need to stay with the problems of ecological issues such as climate change and species extinction.<sup>81</sup> His argument, which ties into Masciandaro and Negarestani’s point, is that rather than absolving or ignoring emotions associated with environmental problems we need to acknowledge them, to mourn losses, a collective mourning he refers to as “Great Grief.”<sup>82</sup> It is this sense of staying with troubling issues, dwelling in black noise, with grief, or “the speculative

glory of the problematic” that I have attempted to articulate here through a discussion of the installation “Black-Noise” and Black Metal.

## V. CONCLUSION

The installation “Black-Noise” and the thoughts expressed in this article do not operate as a pagan ethics for protecting nature, nor are they simply expressing nostalgia for a purer time. Rather, my intension has been to explore Black Metal’s relation to noise as a means of dwelling with the problems induced by consumptive practices such as mining. Drawing on traditions of noise that eschew traditional hallmarks of music and aesthetics such as rhythm and linear score... noise is articulated as “a continuous and heterogeneous fluid material that makes audible the immanence of being and time,”<sup>83</sup> in other words the material realities that shape and are shaped by noise. Black Metal and the installation “Black-Noise” operate within the tensions of empirical (actual) and signal (information), they do not attempt resolution, but extend the problem, vibrate, pulse, interfere, with it. Turning the different tensions of ecological engagement around with black noises, problematizing notions of guilt, shame, nostalgia, sadness, and anger. This form of problematization is not transgressive behaviour to be rid of sin, not to transcend guilt, but to dwell in the tints and textures of noise, of the mediums and materialities that are tied into the ways problems of ecological degradation evolve. The forms of mourning, grief, and solastalgia, brought forth by both “Black-Noise” and WITTR are provocations for dwelling—speculating on different problems within ecological ways of being, of how to intervene in environments. These provocations are to incite tendencies towards the material orderings currently in play, and to question ways in which a world ought to be composed, a questioning of where and how hands are blackened.

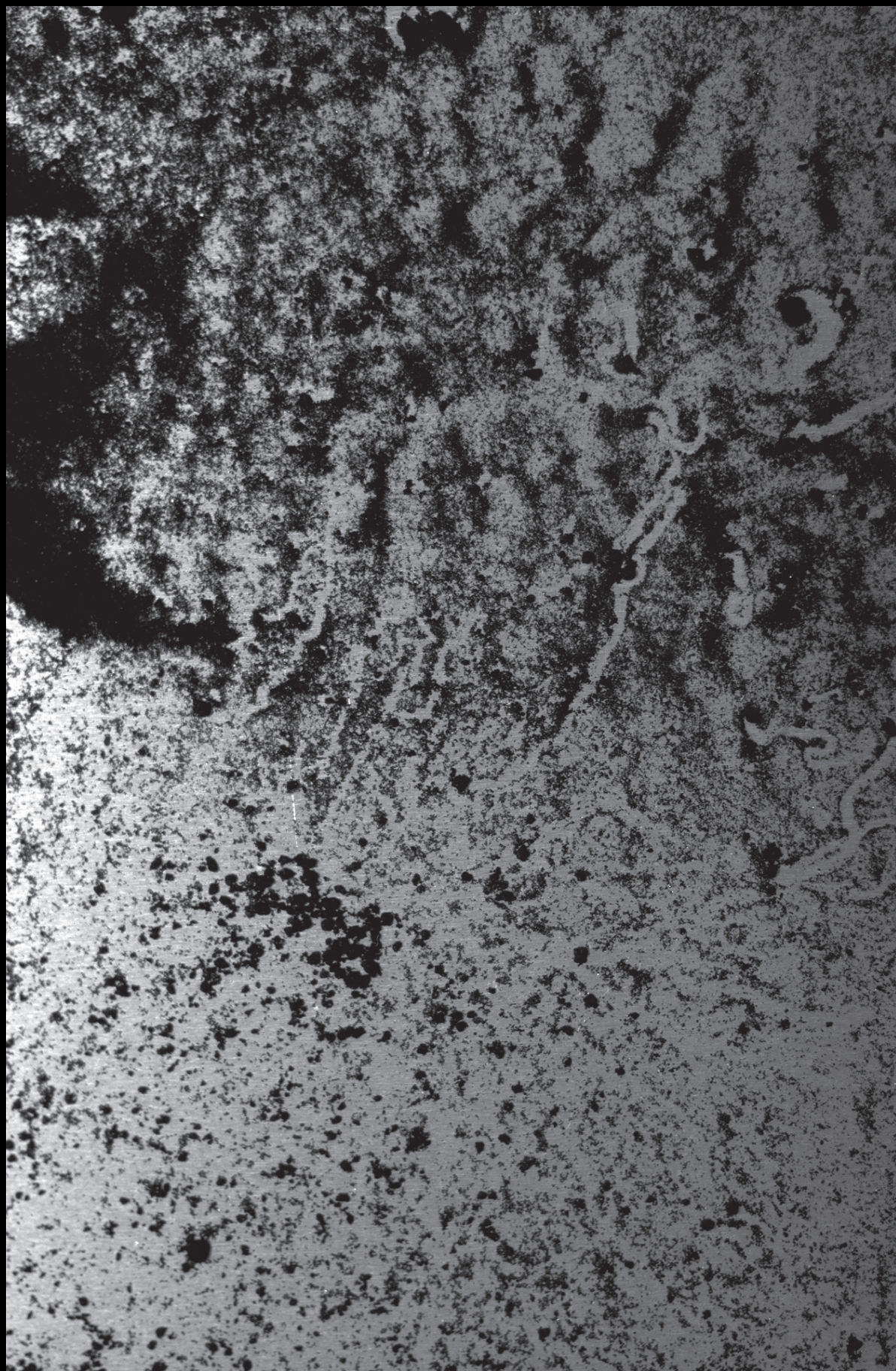






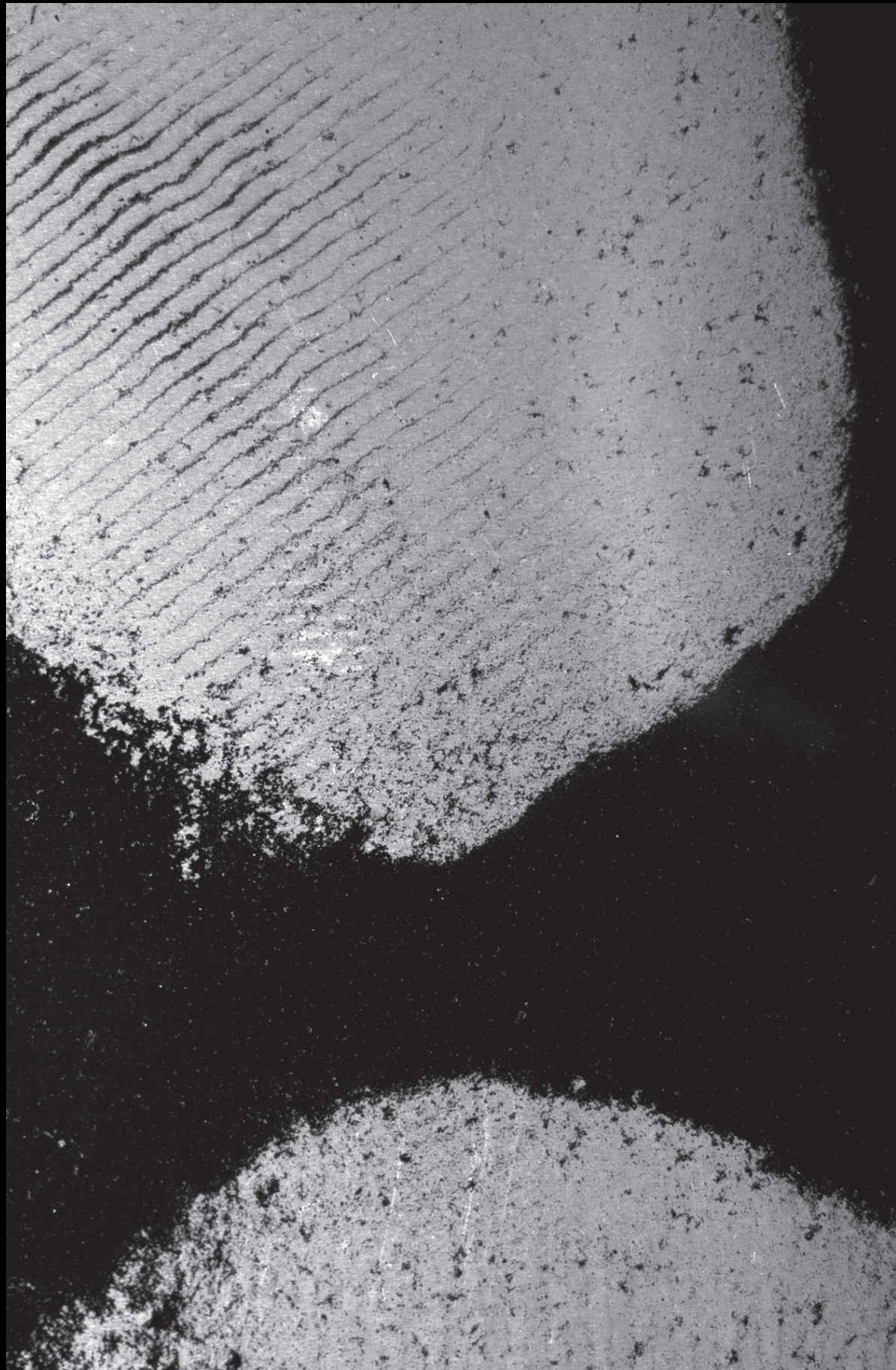






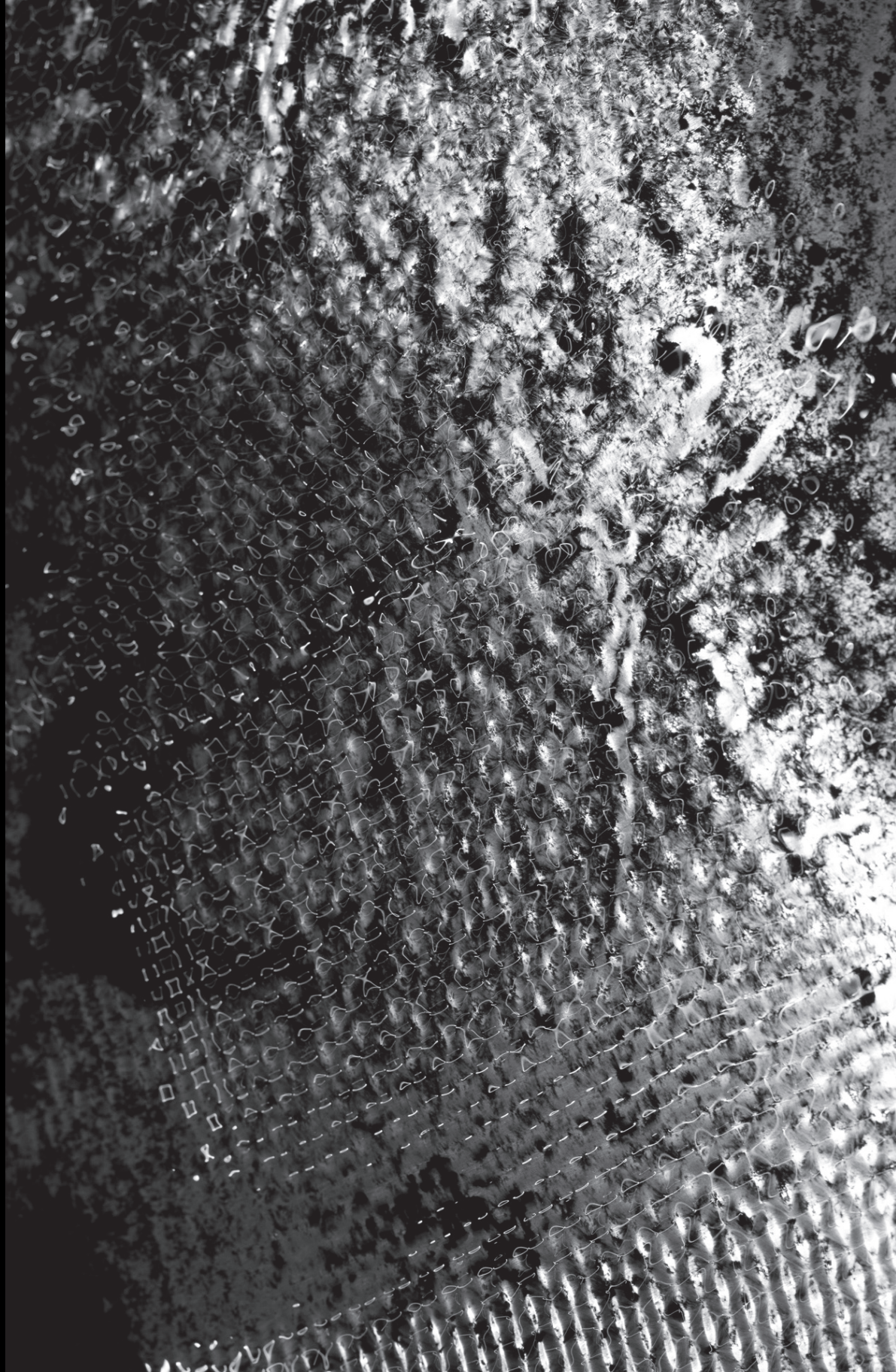












## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hillel Schwartz, "Emergency in 17 Sonnets," *Sonic Acts Research Series* 4 (2014), <http://www.sonicacts.com/portal/2014/10/08/news/hillel-schwartz-noise-and-emergency>.

<sup>2</sup> Manfred Schroeder, *Fractals, Chaos, Power Laws: Minutes from an Infinite Paradise* (W. H. Freeman and Co, 1991), 122.

<sup>3</sup> In using the notion of "blackened hands" I am referring to my sense of guilt in relation to the consumption of resources, such as coal, and my contribution to environmental degradation. It is a reference to the idiom "dirty hands," which arises from the play "Dirty Hands" by Jean-Paul Sartre. I pick up on the notion of getting one's hands dirty in order to engage with messy situations later on in the article in my discussion of the installation "Black-Noise" and the materials I used within this installation.

<sup>4</sup> The Hunter Valley is also referred to as the Hunter Region, or even simply the Hunter.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Atlan, "On a Formal Definition of Organization," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 45 (1974), 295–304; see also, Stephen Crocker, "Noises and Exceptions: Pure Mediality in Serres and Agamben," *Ctheory* (2007), [http://ctheory.net/ctheory\\_wp/noises-and-exceptions-pure-mediality-in-serres-and-agamben](http://ctheory.net/ctheory_wp/noises-and-exceptions-pure-mediality-in-serres-and-agamben).

<sup>6</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (The MIT Press, 1999), 22.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise* (1913), trans. Robert Filliou, *A Great Bear Pamphlet* (Something Else Press, 1967). [Subsequent translations have demonstrated that "Noise" in the original title is plural, "Noises."]

<sup>9</sup> Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise*, 5–6.

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Hegarty, *Noise/Music: A History* (Continuum, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Sean Higgins, "A Deleuzian Noise/Excavating the Body of Abstract Sound," in *Sounding the Virtual: Gilles Deleuze and the Theory and Philosophy of Music*, eds. Nick Nesbitt and Brian Hulse (Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), 68.

<sup>13</sup> Sean Higgins, "A Deleuzian Noise," 68; see also Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (Picador, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Sean Higgins, "A Deleuzian Noise," 68.

<sup>15</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 25.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Steven Connor, "Ears Have Walls: On Hearing Art," in *Sound*, ed. Caleb Kelly (MIT Press, 2011), 129–139.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Connor, "Ears Have Walls: On Hearing Art," 129.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence Schehr (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

<sup>22</sup> See Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (University of Illinois Press, 1949).

<sup>23</sup> Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Caleb Kelly, *Cracked Media: The Sound of Malfunction* (MIT Press, 2009), 75.

<sup>25</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* (Cornell University Press, 1990), 57.



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<sup>81</sup> Per Espen Stoknes, *What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming* (Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015).

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<sup>83</sup> Christoph Cox "From Music to Sound: Being as Time in the Sonic Arts," [abridged version] *Sound*, ed. Caleb Kelly, 85.



MICHAËL SELLAM

*“Dead body of a performance”*  
*Parts 1-3, 2010*



















# VOCAL DISTORTION

Simon Pröll

There is a strange paradox in the way Black Metal deals with information: For an idea as radically vocal as Black Metal, it seems odd to conceal its messages (its lyrics, its images, its viscosity)—that are supposed to be explicit—to such an extent as witnessed and cultivated in its application: Distortion, omission, and elimination, arguably the most extreme forms of alteration, are employed to scatter information, to turn signal into noise, rather than directly promote it. It would be naive to attribute this to pure coincidence: Noise as a central building block of Black Metal is not merely limited to the obvious presence of auditory noise through production techniques; it is also intrinsic to the iconicity of language use and voice, to the positioning and trajectory of the individual. Thus, there are aspects of noise that are clearly perceivable on the linguistic and spatial surface of Black Metal symbols. I suggest that they at the same time reveal the traces that run through the deep structures of Black Metal theory.<sup>1</sup>

In Black Metal vocalisations, noise and distortion are ubiquitous in the form of harsh vocals: shrieking, screaming, spitting. As an informational channel, the voice as a matter of fact is central: It is both the most expressive as well as the most human instrument or sound source available. Harsh vocals, on the other hand, can be seen as the attempt at defying and effectively denying membership of humanity, they (mis)use the very same biological systems that—under usual conditions—provide the most human aspect in the sonic spectrum. On the level of semiotics, by distorting and dehumanising the *significant*, the implication of simultaneously transforming the *signifié* as well is given. (However, this is inevitably a lesson in futility, as the relation between both sides can only be of a symbolic nature.)

Marcel Beyer's novel *Flughunde*<sup>2</sup> (translated into English as *The Karnau Tapes*) circles around the obsession of a sound engineer (active during the days of German fascism) to assemble a complete collection of all sounds that could possibly be articulated by a human being. Over time, his increasing focus on the extremes, the periphery of possible vocalisations—those that are only brought out under extreme

circumstances—forces him to resort to increasingly drastic measures to obtain those sounds. In other words: To understand the limits of human expression (that can serve as a surrogate for existence altogether), it becomes necessary for him to question his own humanity as well. We'll have to ask whether the notional borderline experience of harsh vocals is fit to serve as the catalyst for one's own positioning concerning the essence of what is to be considered human altogether.

Especially modulations, like Attila Csihar's use of overtone / throat singing throughout Mayhem's album *Esoteric Warfare*, indicate that this distortion of the signal can at the same time hint at a second, hidden reality that lies behind the one readily accessible. Here, the necessary alteration of perception is likewise mirrored in the acoustic domain. Techniques like these (that, in this case, originate in traditional Tuvan singing styles<sup>3</sup>) not only yield alteration and contortion to the human voice, but also evoke a sense of temporal displacement, of archaic expression. Yet, while distant, we still recognise the kinship (not the least as by something such as a cultural subconsciousness). The alienation that arises from being confronted—not with a completely unrelated *other*, but with a (biologically / sonically) possible distortion of one's self—questions the reliability of perception and self-construct (see the similar *doppelgänger* motive in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century culture).

The consequent next step in informational distortion is outright negation, the eradication of the (arbitrary) symbolic aspect of communication. Thus, some industrialised Black Metal acts go as far as employing comprehensible voices only in the form of samples, either in addition to their own indiscernible shrieks mixed low (for example Darkspace), or even as the sole source of voices (for example Spektr throughout *Cypher*). In Jorge Luis Borges' short story "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan [The Garden of Forking Paths],"<sup>4</sup> the protagonists deal with the concept of an "infinite" book (that is said to be a "labyrinth"); the decisive hint towards understanding the text is to find the single problem that is *not* being dealt with in the book itself. It is the *absence* of information that is significant, not its presence. This informational gap places a focus on just the same signal that is missing. It is, however, striking that overt electronic manipulations of the voice are relatively rare (Thorns' vocoder-driven cover of Darkthrone's "The Pagan Winter" being one of the few better-known exceptions). In a scene with close ties to straight ambient / electronic / noise music, this can hardly be purely coincidental, but probably is tied—wittingly or unwittingly—to a specific motivation: The objective of harsh vocals is not the mechanisation of the human, but the distortion or deletion of his traditional manifestation.<sup>5</sup>

If we disregard the concrete (auditory) vocalisation and turn towards language use in general, the omnipresence of English as a *lingua franca* in vanilla Pop / Rock and even the Death Metal scene, which all are almost completely uniform in (English) language use, is obvious at first sight. Black Metal, on the other hand, showcases a plethora of different languages; sometimes they can just be considered (in terms of a globalised-

media world) uncommon, sometimes they are highly regional or even historical languages. That this is a conscious decision rather than a coincidence becomes apparent if one dissects the early releases of the so-called “second wave” of Black Metal in Scandinavia. Its pivotal bands started out as or evolved from Death Metal outfits (Darkthrone; Embryonic → Thou Shalt Suffer → Emperor; Old Funeral / Amputation → Burzum / Immortal; Eczema → Satyricon; Phobia → Enslaved). All of their early recordings feature English as sole language; only with their gradual blackening did some of them start to use their native language(s) alongside (or instead of) English.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the unprecedented usage of a language with a rather small number of speakers (there are less than five million native speakers of Norwegian) as one of the dominant tongues of the movement set an example that resonated first within, and then outside of the growing Norwegian scene, leading to the additional usage of other languages (from the other Scandinavian languages, to first mainly German and French). In Eastern Europe (the sphere of Soviet influence) this fixation on English as a *lingua franca* of pop culture (and modern capitalism) had not existed to the extent visible in the West, making the usage of native languages in the emerging blackened scenes a rather natural choice anyway. With time, practically all smaller European national languages became visible as vehicles of Extreme Metal. The tension between two partially conflicting motives—being able to clearly propagate (not to mention sell) one’s message to an audience as large as possible through English, accentuating one’s own heritage and individualism through the mother tongue<sup>7</sup>—is in a large number of instances palpable through the usage of both languages in one and the same context (for example, songs in both languages on just one release, inclusion of translations for the lyrics, bilingual information in booklets, etc.).

But while especially the smaller and smallest languages of Europe (such as Luxembourgish, Icelandic, or Faroese) are rather uncommon in Pop / Rock / Metal lyrics, they are not unheard of—and they are all standardised languages.<sup>8</sup> However, Black Metal soon embraced non-standard or even extinct varieties: Ulver’s *Bergtatt* takes after Old Danish, Enslaved use Old Icelandic and Old Norwegian on *Vikingsligr Veldi* (pioneering a whole sub-movement), historical varieties that have not had native speakers for centuries. Part of this is probably best attributed to an implicit trait of Scandinavian culture, namely the notion of a continuity of history, where past and present are not segregated into distinctive entities but regarded as points on a common scale that are linked by continuous processes. It is an obvious nod not only to the relevance of history per se, but to the present as well. Actually spoken by native speakers who are still alive, but in usually very small numbers, are local dialects;<sup>9</sup> just to elaborate on one example: Two releases by Lunar Aurora (the *A haudiga Fluag* split with Paysage d’Hiver and their farewell album *Hoagascht*) feature lyrics in their home dialect, based in Upper Bavaria. Usage of language varieties like these results in a very narrow communicative range. They might—with a certain margin of error—in principle be



comprehensible for listeners competent in related varieties, but their usage still is a symbol of exclusiveness, like is the case with every in-group language (for example youth language, slang, or technical jargon)—you might understand it, but that does not mean you are a part of the community of its speakers. In addition, most of the time these varieties are unstandardised: They usually have no written history, no writing history and thus no writing conventions at all. In a world that is increasingly dominated by written communication (a means of communication that over millennia was second to spoken language, both in human phylogenesis and ontogenesis),<sup>10</sup> the use of a variety without a conventionalised writing system is an anachronism (and incidentally, a good mystery).

There is an obvious anti-globalised aspect to the deliberate use of regional languages,<sup>11</sup> but it is also a testament to claiming validity of a specific, individual point of view—not only in a geographical, but also in a cultural and even (according to the principle of linguistic relativity)<sup>12</sup> mentalistic sense. If we see language as a mental lens that focuses and shapes, but also distorts our way of perceiving and interacting with the ontic world, it is a natural consequence to assume that emissions that are divergent on the linguistic side are a sign of a divergent state of mind as well. Multifarious language use in Black Metal thus is dissonant and ultimately—on a large scale—noisy. It is to be understood as a testimony to individuality and one's own Cartesian point of origin. This is more than a countermovement versus (sub)cultural predecessors, it is a discontinuity, an a-historical trait that constitutes a breach in the imaginary evolutionary line that leads to Black Metal.<sup>13</sup>

On a related notion, we probably should not forget that in a Christian sense the proverbial Babylonian confusion of tongues is a punishment of God. Thus, increasing linguistic diversity and individualism is doing the Devil's work. (Thinking this Babel-scenario through to the end implicates the strange notion that linguistic globalisation, i.e., the dominance of English as a world language, should literally be considered paradisiacal.) However, as with many putative punishments, we may see this as a path to a hidden truth: Without the superstructure of concrete, denotative semantics in verbal communication, we are left to interpret the visceral, emotive proportion of the message to greater avail. The confusion arising from noise and distortion then is surpassed by an intuitive, archaic understanding "beyond words." To exemplify: To be able to understand the lyrics to "Eins mit der Essenz der Nacht" by Nocte Obducta<sup>14</sup> in an explicit denotative sense, one would have to be quite knowledgeable in German, and even then, having the text sheet at hand could be advisable; to correctly interpret the blunt emotional notion and momentum, one doesn't. Again, vocal distortion is a form of regression that recalls a cultural and developmental stage long gone in everyday life.

In typographical form, this theme continues with cryptic band logos and lyrics written in Blackletter, Fraktur, or runes (if at all). Firstly, let us consider band logos: They are the primary visual icon of a band, a reference for identification—yet, the



amount of illegible (to the laymen, that is) logos is legion. That a stunningly large number of Metal logos were designed by a single individual (namely Christophe Szpajdel)<sup>15</sup> accounts only for a partial explanation of this phenomenon, as there is a general trait that seems to exist independent of the designer in question (or, probably, as a cultural feedback loop between the prototypical form of logos and designers). These logos create the paradox of being an icon that at the same time defies identification and reference. In public perception, this paradox leads to consternation and even ridicule.<sup>16</sup> However, the semiotic function seems rather straightforward: The band logos in question veil their meaning to the uninitiated, but offer a point of shared reference to insiders (“a Password,”<sup>17</sup> as Daniël van der Velden puts it). With the (illegible) textual aspect blanked out, the purely graphical side of a logo usually should be regarded analogous to proper names in natural languages: According to the dominant view in onomastics, a proper name has no semantic “meaning,” but a purely referential function.<sup>18</sup> But in contrast to usual names or logos, at least some Black Metal logos seem to provide additional information. Even though we might neither know nor be able to read a logo, we still recognise it as being part of a larger discourse due to specific features. Consider for example Figure 1: This graphical object—a combination /

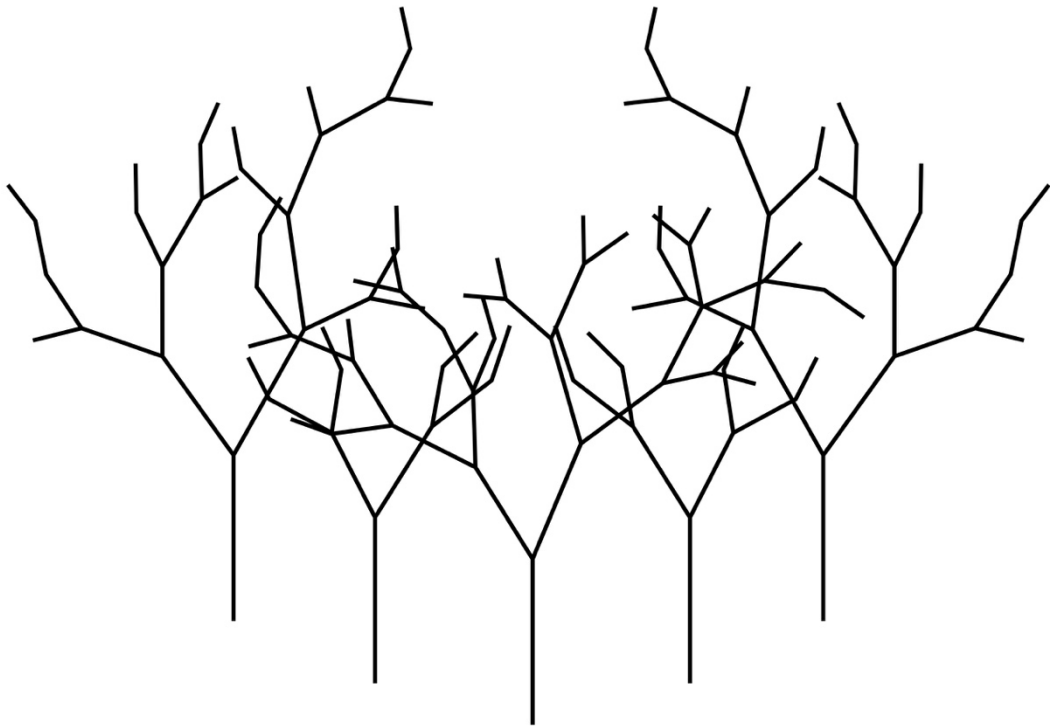


Figure 1: Generic generative pseudo logo.

mirrored repetition of three generative trees, automatically rendered by a simple stochastic process, otherwise unedited—does not refer to any band. However, because of the distinctive features it shares with known, semantically filled logos, chances are it could (given the appropriate circumstances) pass as one (of course that does not mean it would be considered to be a *good* logo, but that's not the point).

Why can Figure 1 be interpreted as a logo without having a designated reference? Apparently there is a prototypical symbolism rooted in the visual language of logos. Amelia Ishmael pointed me towards the idea that “sonic signifiers” hint at the relation between sight and sound when it comes to Black Metal logos. This would suggest that logos are not (in a semiotic sense) purely arbitrary, but rather contain at least an indexical aspect (to adopt Charles Peirce's terminology).<sup>19</sup> Wilhelm F. Nicolaisen fittingly points out that because “semantic transparency is not expected of a name in our Western cultures,” instances where we can attribute semantics to a usually opaque symbol “can be quite baffling and unsettling.”<sup>20</sup>

While the visual contiguity to the field of logos is conspicuous, it could still be argued that Blackletter and Fraktur as fonts are simply inherited symbols from traditional Heavy Metal (or, albeit only in few cases, to be viewed as a political statement). But they do tend to appear less in most contemporary (non-blackened) Metal subgenres; they do not seem to primarily serve as a reminder to the beginnings of Heavy Metal—still, they suggest the same ties to the (both factional and fictional) past that the use of historical language varieties or band names as 1349 imply: Historicising the present as a comment on a lost golden age. Especially for runic writing, the signs offer a double meaning<sup>21</sup>—they transport the message and at the same time the encryption.<sup>22</sup> Linking back to an extra-semiotic function, van der Velden contemplates that “[a]s a form, Fraktur also resembles spikes, flames, foliage, castles, nights, scythes, church towers, and fences, and in more than one respect is related to the later generation of illegible logos.”<sup>23</sup>

Once more, the total deletion of all communication is the ultimate distortion: The omission of all song lyrics is a strong, but paradox statement (“one cannot not communicate,”<sup>24</sup> as Paul Watzlawick famously exposed). The remaining gap inevitably puts an unsettling emphasis on what is missing.<sup>25</sup> In a cultural context that is not exactly known for being timid in forms of expression, we might even be left with the innuendo that the thoughts expressed might not be fit to be put to paper simply because they would be target to censorship.<sup>26</sup>

There is also an aspect to consider that is best explained in terms of gestalt psychology: The symbol juxtaposed against a dark background.<sup>27</sup> Again, this is a motive that involves more than just one layer of abstraction. First, consider the purely sensory sensation: Figure 2 exemplifies the functioning of the *gestalt effect*, the interplay of biological / neuronal human features that lets us discern patterns where there are none. The physical stimuli presented in Figure 2 are nothing more than five black Pac-Man-

like figures and 20 more-or-less random black geometrical forms roughly in the shape of slices of cake. Yet, we interpret these stimuli as if a white, complex, five-pointed shape were visible. There isn't. This is a sequitur of the brain, not the stimulus.<sup>28</sup>

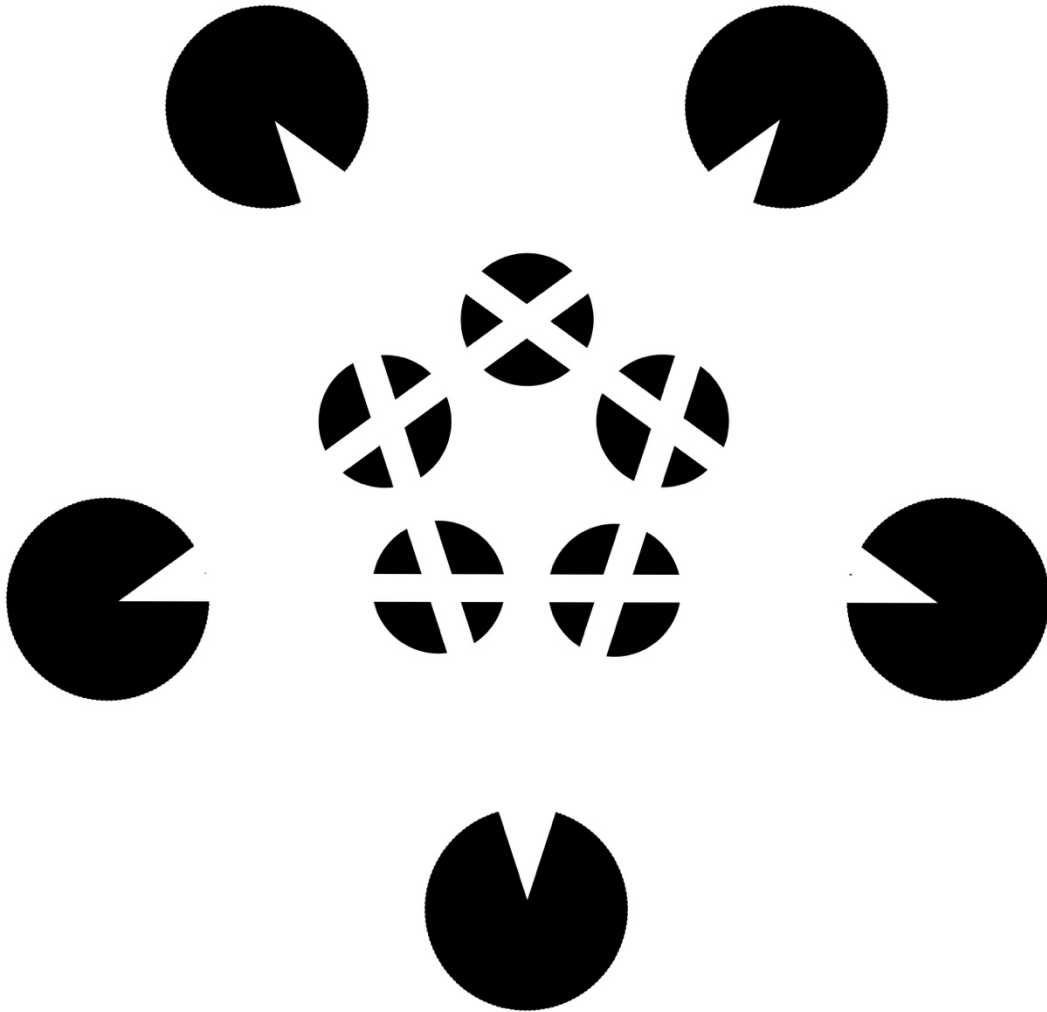


Figure 2: Illustration of gestalt effects.

Putting the symbol (the writing, the logo) against the (physically) dark background is a play on *figure* and *ground*, the elements whose antitheses constitute perception. It forces the signal that has an elusive physical form into the role of the figure. It is an *inversion* in perception that is obviously mirrored on more abstract levels, where the (metaphorically) dark background serves as a thematic anticlimax.

The way that geographical space is conceived of can be regarded as a spatial projection of the mind as well. In the case of Black Metal, this kind of spatiality can be broken down to three stages: national, regional, and local. The emphasis on the national level<sup>29</sup> in initial states of the movement clearly is to be seen against the backdrop of European Romanticism that gave rise to the idea of a connection between culture, identity, and nation. This directly connects back to the passages above on language use: The rise of the modern European national languages gained massive momentum through national Romanticism and went hand in hand with the idea of nation states.<sup>30</sup> Especially the regional and local levels are highly visible in album titles (see Taake's *Over Bjoergvin graater himmerik* [the kingdom of heaven weeps over Bergen] and *Hordalands doedskvad* [death squad Hordaland]), song titles (see Enslaved's "Hordalendingen" on *Eld*), merchandise (see Marduk's "Östergötland" shirts), or even as the definition of whole subgenres ("Cascadian Black Metal"). This tendency to grasp space as small-scaled and self-contained as possible is a mechanism of individualism, leading to a swarm of localised sources that are pulsing out of sync with each other. Not surprisingly, Anders Odden explicitly claims that "metal er et bygdefenomen [Metal is a rural phenomenon]."<sup>31</sup>

Again, the alternative (or extension) to this individualism (i.e., noise) is the avoidance of concrete points of spatial reference. In practice, this ranges from a diffuse construction of "the North" (*A Blaze in the Northern Sky*, Darkthrone; "A Perfect Vision of the Rising Northland," Immortal, *Diabolical Fullmoon Mysticism*; "Mother North," Satyricon, *Nemesis Divina*; *Battles in the North*, Immortal) in form of a placeholder both in geography and mindset to the deliberate vagueness of the mythic "beyond" ("Slaget i skogen bortenfor [the battle in the forest beyond]," Enslaved, *Hordanes Land*; "Beyond the Great Vast Forest," Emperor, *In the Nightside Eclipse*; "Dweller in the Abyss," Nidingr, *Greatest of Deceivers*; "Across the Vacuum," Darkthrone, *Ravishing Grimness*). Immortal goes as far as introducing their own semi-mythological concept of a fictional place "Blashyrkh" (on *Battles in the North* and following albums). Black Metal forests might be vast, but they are never globalised. The geographical and communicative scope is narrow at least, idiosyncratic at most.

Not all of the above can be characterised as innovations stemming solely from Black Metal: The lo-fi / DIY approach to production with searingly high guitar frequencies are mirrored in Grindcore and Punk; harsh vocals as a masking technique are probably inherited—albeit in a different style—from Death Metal and are common in Hardcore and Grindcore as well, etc. But while the single traits might not be exclusive to Black Metal, their accumulation is. This "sum of transformations"<sup>32</sup> ultimately leads to an emergent sense of contentual seclusion and fragmentation.

A truism of literary criticism would be to assume that these informational deficiencies are to be filled by the recipient (drawing on her / his own knowledge and biography)—however, this does not hold true for black noise, as it would simply push

the interpretation of opaque signals into plain post-romantic escapism. If we parallel Black Metal and Romanticism—and it seems reasonable to do so, not least because of the respective ambivalence between the will to live and the death drive, the intransigency of lifestyles, the post-Enlightenment backlash towards nature and spirituality, the social and cultural shock value (mostly due to exquisitely dark themes) on contemporaries<sup>33</sup>—it is worth pointing out that Romanticism as a mindset scattered (or rather frayed) into conservatism, mysticism, naturalism, realism, and politics (among others) after reaching the height of its vigour. The same traits, even the same escape routes, are visible in today's Black Metal culture. That politics have become a major theme (in detail, both in the lyrics themselves and in interviews; on a meta level, in the discourse surrounding the history and development of the scene) needs no further explaining and is mirrored in the *Vormärz* period; there is an immense armada of new but stylistically highly conservative bands following in the footsteps of the originators;<sup>34</sup> outfits like Deafheaven augment the sonic aesthetics inherited from the earlier scene with a bleak realism / naturalism in lyrics that expose the dread and latent tragedy of concrete everyday social life instead of evoking the highly symbolic or idealistic imagery of earlier Black Metal or Romanticism; projects like Wardruna push the boundaries of an expanding acoustic sonic universe triggered by early Ulver, hinting at cultural regression and a cyclicity of history. Kvelertak distort the orthodox imagery of old school bands with hints of irony and refraction: Their reimagining of Norse mythology, laced with textual self-references and constant nods to the ancestry of Black Metal in traditional Rock that the originators intended to negate.

But—again, seen in relation to Romanticism—these developments should not be understood as externally driven, but rather to be the natural consequence of traits intrinsic to Black Metal from the beginning onwards. The dilemma of realising the inadequacy of the status quo as well as living in a society and time of crisis for the individual has always resulted in a striving for rugged individualism: It is no big wonder that the Italian Renaissance with its prototypical polymaths and its cultural, philosophical, and technological advances developed against the backdrop of the Black Death, the Little Ice Age (with resulting famines), and political fragmentation, just as Romanticism was at least in part triggered by the shockwaves emanating from the French Revolution. Being vocal about distinctions and boundaries in juxtaposition to the other is more than a simple option—it becomes a driving force, a programmatic imperative.

In sum, individualism spawns noise, as expressions and actions that originate from different points and with different trajectories interfere with each other and create a (more or less) random pattern. In principle, it all starts with a harsh signal originating from a single source in the form of pure unpredictability (cf. Figure 3, leftmost)<sup>35</sup>—but, in a paradoxical change of events, the sum of individual acts turns noise into static. In the noise of a dripping water faucet, we can aurally identify every single drop; the

interplay of an increasing number of drops creates patterns and superstructures; in the noise of a waterfall, consisting of a host of single drops, these single instances blend into one wall of more or less random coloured noise (cf. Figure 3, rightmost).

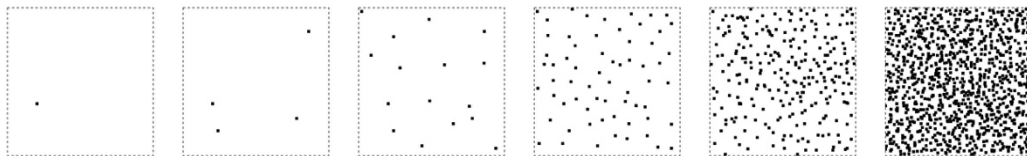


Figure 3: From individualsim to static (multiplication factor 4 per iteration).

Thus, the combination and interplay of those left-hand idiosyncrasies (fittingly dubbed an “antibibelsk [anti-biblical], evil egotrip”<sup>36</sup>) that constitute Black Metal are at the same time fit to create an all-encompassing drone, negating (or rather drowning out) the individual acts that caused it in the first place. As is the case with all entities, the initial program of Black Metal contains the code of its inevitable own destruction: It is determined to perish by its own inherent radiance of noise. The single work that arguably epitomises this dilemma best from a sonic viewpoint might be Emperor’s *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk*. With highly complex arrangements and lots of harmonic content, each individual layer of sound competes with all the others. The result is not just the usual 1990s distortionfest, it is a complex wall of sound that seems almost chaotic on first contact. All the distinct elements of the mix struggle to be heard, both drowning out and augmenting each other; amongst them, both sublime and on the verge of being sublimed in layers of harmony and noise, hints of an (in)human voice.

On a greater scale, looking at the genesis of the initial parts of the scene, it is in retrospect stunning how musically and conceptually heterogeneous the original outputs labelled as “Black Metal” really were. In principle, every outfit spawned a different strain: Only with time and the immense quantitative growth following the 1991–1993 events, iteration upon iteration on the original ideas led to (1) contentual accommodation and (2) the illusion of a homogeneous movement.<sup>37</sup>

This scenario of imminent and inevitable failure of the individual as well as the signal is a paradoxical trait, as it both instigates and constrains the limits of Black Metal theory. Having completed the cycle of exuding noise and consequently being drowned by it, we are coerced back to our starting point. Firstly, this lesson in futility leads to humiliation.<sup>38</sup> But it also prompts reiteration—and ultimately suggests radicalisation. If it is the nature of Black Metal to radiate and propagate individuality, propagators are soon to lose the momentum of their individuality to emergent noise. Staying atop this ocean of noise requires the individual signal, one’s own vocal distortion, to become louder, stronger, more extreme. It can be argued that the violence that led to the

notoriety of the early scene was to a certain extent the result of the first, radical iterations of this spiral of signal and noise.<sup>39</sup>

The only way out is through: It is a narcissistic wound, a *blessure narcissique*, that is Bleeding Black Noise.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> All points made are neither exclusive nor imperative; it is not the intention of this text to suggest a closed catalogue of indispensable features sans which there is no Black Metal. Further, from certain common principles does not follow uniformity. On the contrary, it is probable that it is just these common principles that generate diversity (and ultimately noise). I am, however, aware of the risk of constructing dichotomies where there might not be any.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Beyer, *Flughunde* (Suhrkamp, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> For an ethnomusicological approach to Tuvan throat singing see Theodore Craig Levin, *Where Rivers and Mountains Sing: Sound, Music, and Nomadism in Tuva and Beyond* (Indiana University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (Emecé, 1956).

<sup>5</sup> I am unsure whether this is in conflict with the point made by Daniel Lukes, “Black Metal Machine: Theorizing Industrial Black Metal,” in *Helvete 1* (punctum books, 2013): 69–94; however, blackened theory might probably not be without contradiction.

<sup>6</sup> This is all the more striking if we consider the clearly above-average proficiency in English as a foreign language in Scandinavian countries. Because of space limitations I can only hint at some of the reasons for this: An efficient schooling system, combined with a media landscape that offers high exposure to English on a daily basis (most televised programs are not dubbed, but subtitled).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Kristoffer Rygg’s comment: “Jeg vet ikke riktig hvorfor det ble et norgesoppheng i textene, men det var en gjengs følelse av at «dette er vårt». I forlengelsen av det kom norgespatriotismen kanskje informert av hybris [I don’t really know why there came to be a concentration on Norway in the lyrics, but it was sort of a sentiment in the sense of «this is ours». Norwegian patriotism came as a continuation of that, maybe informed by hubris],” (my translation) quoted in Harald Fossberg, *Nyanser av svart. Historien om norsk Black Metal* (Cappellen Damm, 2015), 216.

<sup>8</sup> Usually, a language could be considered standardised if it shows (most of) the following features: a standard pronunciation (i.e., a pronunciation that is not considered to be an accent by most of its speakers), conventionalised orthography, official legal status, usage in government contexts and national media, a language institute, and a developed literary canon (see also Ulrich Ammon, “Standard Variety,” in *Sociolinguistics: An International Handbook of the Science of Language and Society* 1, 2nd edition, eds. Ulrich Ammon, Norbert Dittmar, Klaus J. Mattheier, and Peter Trudgill (Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 273–283).

<sup>9</sup> As to what clearly separates languages from dialects, professional opinions vary; it is neither practical nor feasible to construct objective criteria on this. Max Weinreich popularised a makeshift definition that is stunningly simple but nevertheless holds true for the relation between popular perception, political power, and practical application: “a shprakh iz a dialekt mit an armey un flot [a language is a dialect with an army and navy],” Max Weinreich, “Der YIVO un di problemen fun undzer tsayt,” in *YIVO Bleter* 25.1 (1945), 13.

<sup>10</sup> We might not (yet) know when our genetic ancestors reached language skills comparable to ours, but we can be pretty certain that they only came to develop writing systems much later and used them much less in a quantitative sense.

<sup>11</sup> It should probably be noted that the irony of a native German writing in English about the role of minor languages in globalisation processes is not lost on me.

<sup>12</sup> Following Wilhelm von Humboldt, the notion that structure and constraints of the mother tongue might or might not shape (or even determine) thought processes (nowadays primarily known as the *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis*, see e.g., Paul Kay and Willet Kempton, “What is the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis?,” in *American Anthropologist* 86.1 (1984), 65–79) has repeatedly been the focus of intense debate in linguistics and anthropology. To date, the question remains unresolved.

<sup>13</sup> While the aim of *Helvete* is not a musicological one, it is worth mentioning that the connex between sociology and musical form is still under-researched. Tagg thus stresses “that a musicology of society is needed to develop models that can meaningfully examine relationships between different ways of structuring music and different collective subjectivities” (Philip Tagg, *Music's Meanings* [Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2013], 445). It is obvious that the fitness of theories is ideally tested on extremes; Black Metal thus would provide a veritable resource for respective studies.

<sup>14</sup> Nocte Obducta, *Galgendämmerung: Von Nebel, Blut und Totgeburten* (Grind Syndicate Media, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> Notable examples would be the logos of Arcturus, Blut aus Nord, Borknagar, Dimmu Borgir, Emperor, Graveland, Horna, Moonspell (old logo), Old Man's Child, Tsjuder, and Wolves In The Throne Room, to name but a few of the better known ones. Christophe Szpajdel, *Lord of the Logos: Designing the Metal Underground* (Die Gestalten Verlag, 2009) provides an impressive insight into a lot more material.

<sup>16</sup> Arguably the most interesting form of discourse on this topic is recursion, where symbols are used in a context that is again of symbolic nature: Grindcore prodigies Japanische Kampfhörspiele almost perfected this meta-communicative view in their respective song “Diese Blackmetalband aus Dortmund,” featuring the lyrics “this Black Metal band from Dortmund [a German city] / whose logo I can't decipher / has a gig in the youth centre / of Waldbrohl [a German small town, “Wald” meaning forest]” (originally in German, my translation), Poostew / Japanische Kampfhörspiele, *Heirat aus Hass / Scheidung aus Spass* (Silentstagnation, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Daniël van der Velden, “Crypto Logo Jihad: Black Metal and the Aesthetics of Evil,” in *Metropolis M* 3 (2007), <http://metropolism.com/magazine/2007-no3/crypto-logo-jihad/english>.

<sup>18</sup> See in detail Saul A. Kripke, *Naming and necessity* (Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>19</sup> Analogous graphical (non-logo) examples are given in Amelia Ishmael, “The Night Is No Longer Dead; It Has a Life of its Own,” in *Helvete* 1. See also Amelia Ishmael, “Black Thorns in the White Cube” (exhibition catalogue, 2012), citing respective remarks by Karlynn Holland.

<sup>20</sup> Wilhelm F. H. Nicolaisen, “Name and Appellative,” in *Namenforschung*, eds. Ernst Eichler, Gerold Hilty, Heinrich Löffler, Hugo Steger, and Ladislav Zgusta (de Gruyter, 1995), 388.

<sup>21</sup> This becomes a triple meaning if we factor in their ideography.

<sup>22</sup> Encryption through the use of runes has a long-standing tradition in Europe, see Andreas Nievergelt, *Althochdeutsch in Runenschrift. Geheimschriftliche volkssprachige Griffelglossen* (Hirzel, 2009). In the context of writing systems it should also be noted that Hoest of Taake willingly distorts the codified modern Norwegian alphabet by substituting the letters æ, ø, and å with their older (that is obsolete) spellings *ae*, *oe*, and *aa*.

<sup>23</sup> Daniël van der Velden, “Crypto Logo Jihad: Black Metal and the Aesthetics of Evil.”



<sup>24</sup> Paul Watzlawick, Janet H. Beavin, and Don D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication* (Norton, 1967), 51.

<sup>25</sup> A prominent example: When Gorgoroth released their first album for German semi-major label Nuclear Blast (*Destroyer*), the booklet contained no lyrics to the songs themselves, but two militaristic poems and a statement on the missing separation of church and state in Norway—all written in Norwegian.

<sup>26</sup> See also Einar Engelstad's comment, which hints at a purely conventional reasoning: "Og hvis du kunne lese teksten på kassettcoverne, så var det mislykka [And if you could read the text on the cassette sleeve, then it was a failure]" (my translation), quoted in Harald Fossberg, *Nyanse av svart: Historien om norsk Black Metal* (Cappellen Damm, 2015), 52.

<sup>27</sup> For early accounts see George Humphrey, "The psychology of the gestalt," in *Journal of Educational Psychology* 15.7 (1924), 401–412.

<sup>28</sup> Recommended further reading on this includes John R. Anderson, *Cognitive psychology and its implications*, 7th edition (Worth Publishers, 2009), 32–62, and John P. J. Pinel, *Biopsychology*, 4th edition (Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 192–199.

<sup>29</sup> For national symbolism in Black Metal see also Vivek Venkatesh, Jeffrey S. Podoshen, Kathryn Urbaniak, and Jason J. Wallin, "Eschewing Community: Black Metal," in *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 25 (2015): 66–81.

<sup>30</sup> The curious linguistic situation of Norway, where two highly similar official written varieties exist for one and the same language, can at least partially be directly traced back to the post-romantic emancipation of Norway as a state (cf. Lars Vikør, *Språkplanlegging. Prinsipp og praksis* [Novus, 2007]).

<sup>31</sup> My translation. Quoted in Harald Fossberg, *Nyanse av svart: Historien om norsk Black Metal* (Cappellen Damm, 2015), 184.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Gjöll, *Sum Of Transformations* (Ant-Zen, 2009).

<sup>33</sup> To further systematically comment on the kinship and parallels of Romanticism and Black Metal (both emerging movements in times of crisis of the individual) that is apparent in imagery and ideology would be redundant here if done briefly, bound to fail if tried conclusively, and is thus better left to minds more competent than mine. I will restrain myself to just one more example: David Prescott-Steed, "Frostbite On My Feet: Representations of Walking in Black Metal Visual Culture," in *Helvete* 1: 45–68 extensively commented on walking in Black Metal; the wanderer is among the quintessential motives in romanticism that we rediscover regularly in song titles ("han som reiste [he, who travelled]," Burzum, *Det som engang var*; "The Wanderer," Emperor, *Anthems to the Welkin at Dusk*; "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog," Wolves in the Throne Room, *Black Cascade*; the last one of course taking its title directly from Caspar David Friedrich's iconic and quintessential painting).

<sup>34</sup> In this context, I deem it worth repeating what Brenda S. Gardenour Walker noticed in the previous issue of *Helvete*: "Bound together into a group of un-Christian un-believers, those who participate in black metal culture at this first and binary reflective level form an inverted organization that is as conservative in its behaviours and beliefs as orthodox Christianity." Brenda S. Gardenour Walker, "Through the Looking Glass Darkly: Medievalism, Satanism, and the Dark Illumination of the self in the Aesthetics of Black Metal," in *Helvete* 2 (punctum books, 2015), 20.

<sup>35</sup> "It starts with a point," Elodie Lesourd and Amelia Ishmael, "Eccentricities and Disorientations: Experiencing Geometries in Black Metal," in *Helvete* 2, 54.

<sup>36</sup> Einar Engelstad, quoted in Harald Fossberg, *Nyanse av svart. Historien om norsk Black Metal* (Cappellen Damm, 2015), 56.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Kristoffer Rygg: “[T]o be a force to be counted on in the scene you had to create your own thing,” cited in Dayal Patterson, *Black Metal: Evolution of the Cult* (Feral House, 2013), 400.

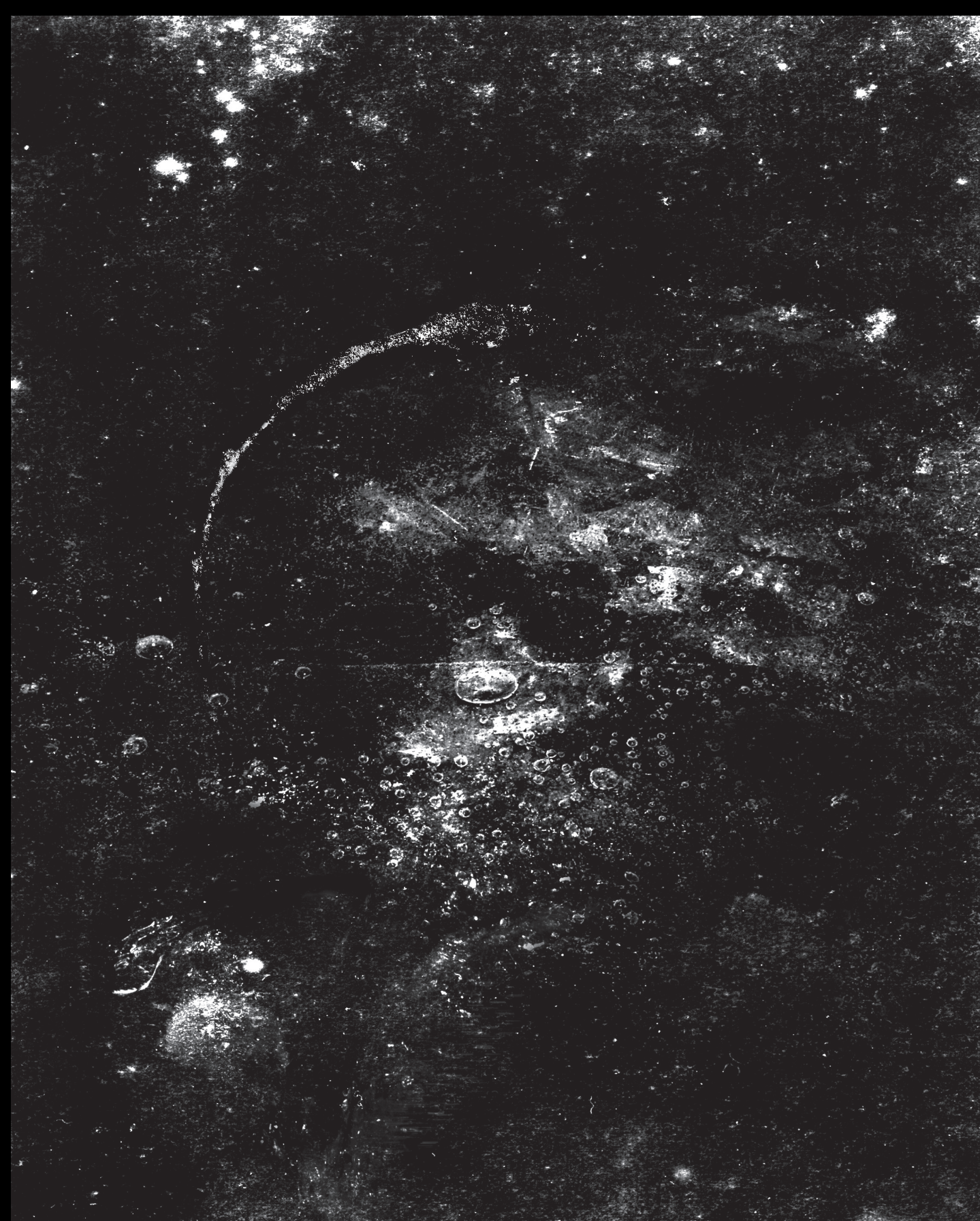
<sup>38</sup> This is to be seen in context with the concept of (psychological) wounds laid out by Sigmund Freud, “Eine Schwierigkeit der Psychoanalyse,” in *Imago: Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswissenschaften* V (1917): 1–7.

<sup>39</sup> In this respect, the early ‘90s scene is reminiscent of the rise of small terrorist groups like German left-wing terror cell “Rote Armee Fraktion [Red Army Faction],” not by accident dubbed the “härteste Band von allen [toughest band of all],” see Christian Jäger, “Die ‘härteste Band von allen’: Terrorismus in der gegenwärtigen Literatur und Populär-Kultur,” in *Mythos Terrorismus: Vom Deutschen Herbst zum 11. September*, eds. Matteo Galli and Heinz-Peter Preusser (Heidelberg, winter 2006), 117–128, and in general Thomas Hecken, *Avantgarde und Terrorismus: Rhetorik der Intensität und Programme der Revolte von den Futuristen bis zur RAF* (Transcript, 2006).

# GAST BOUSCHET AND NADINE HILBERT

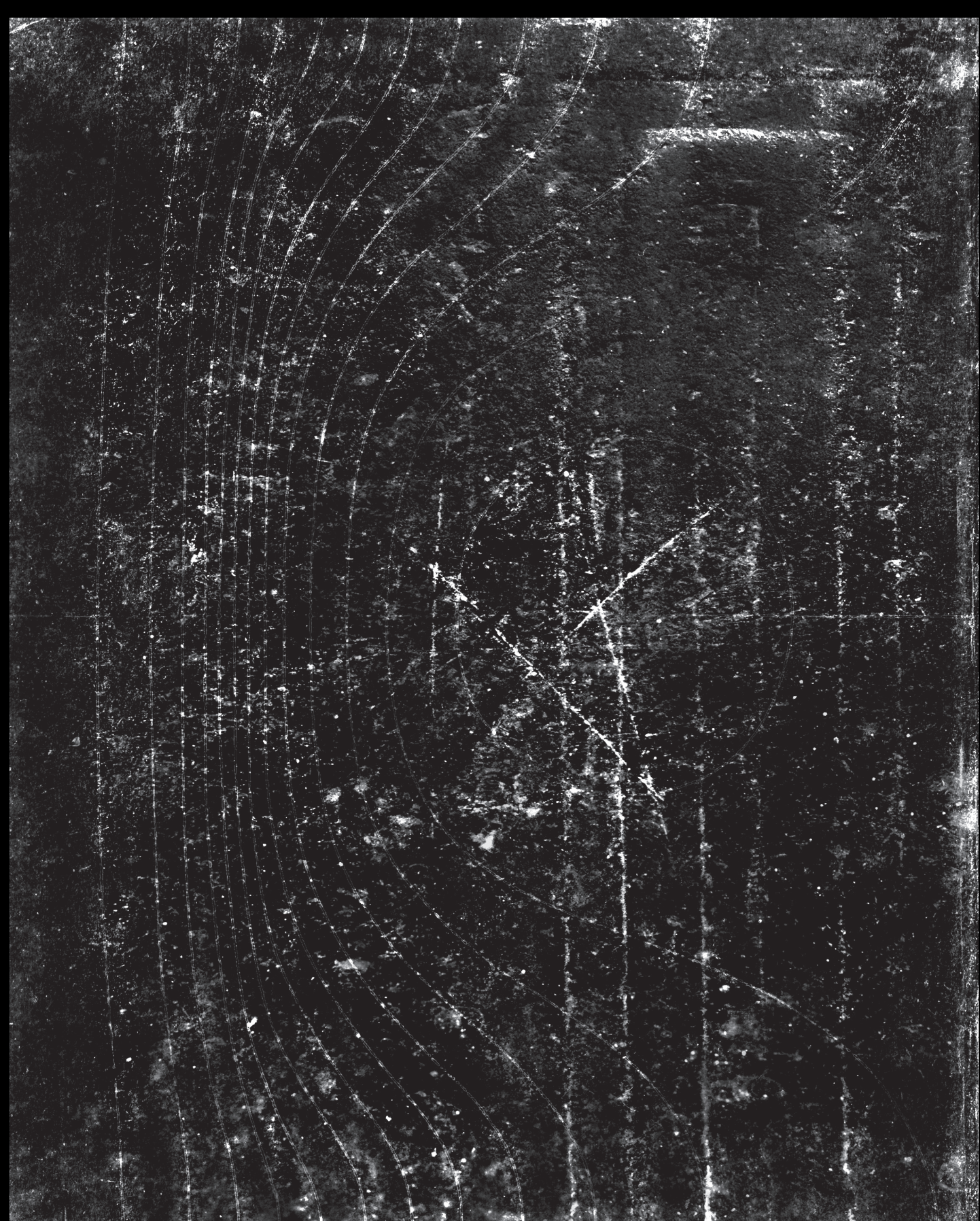
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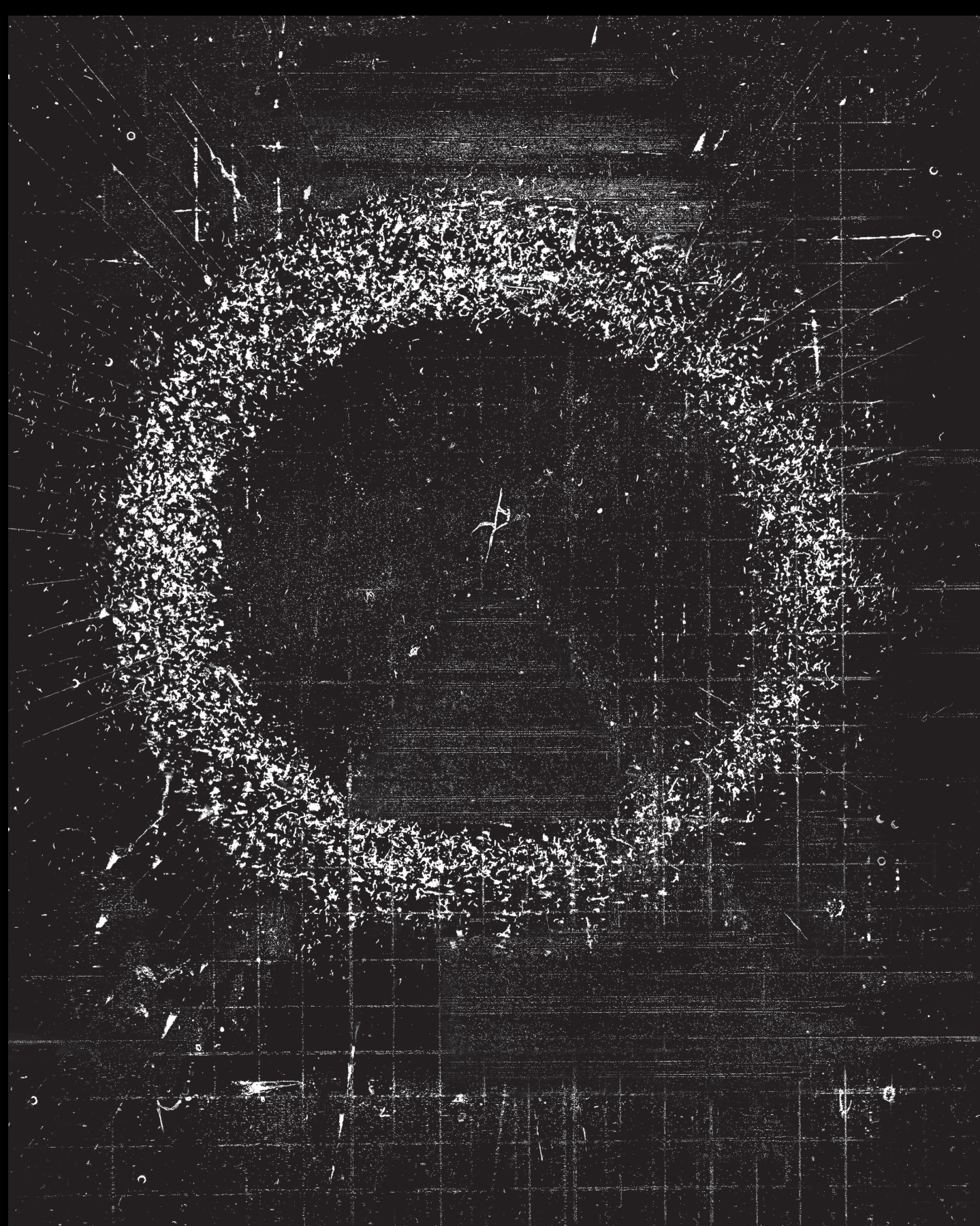














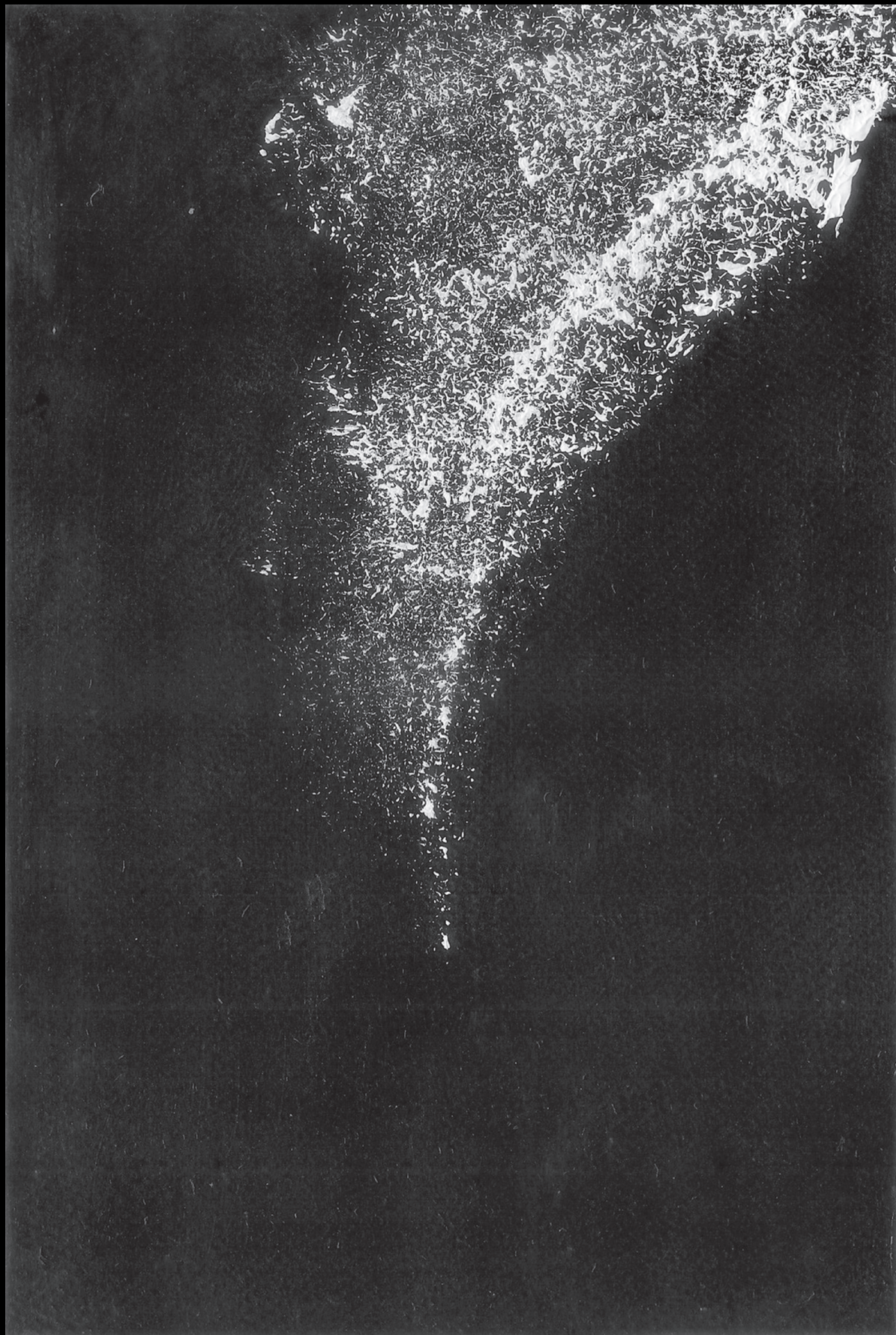
BAGUS JALANG

*“Distraction”*

*Parts 3-5, acrylic painting on paper, 2011*

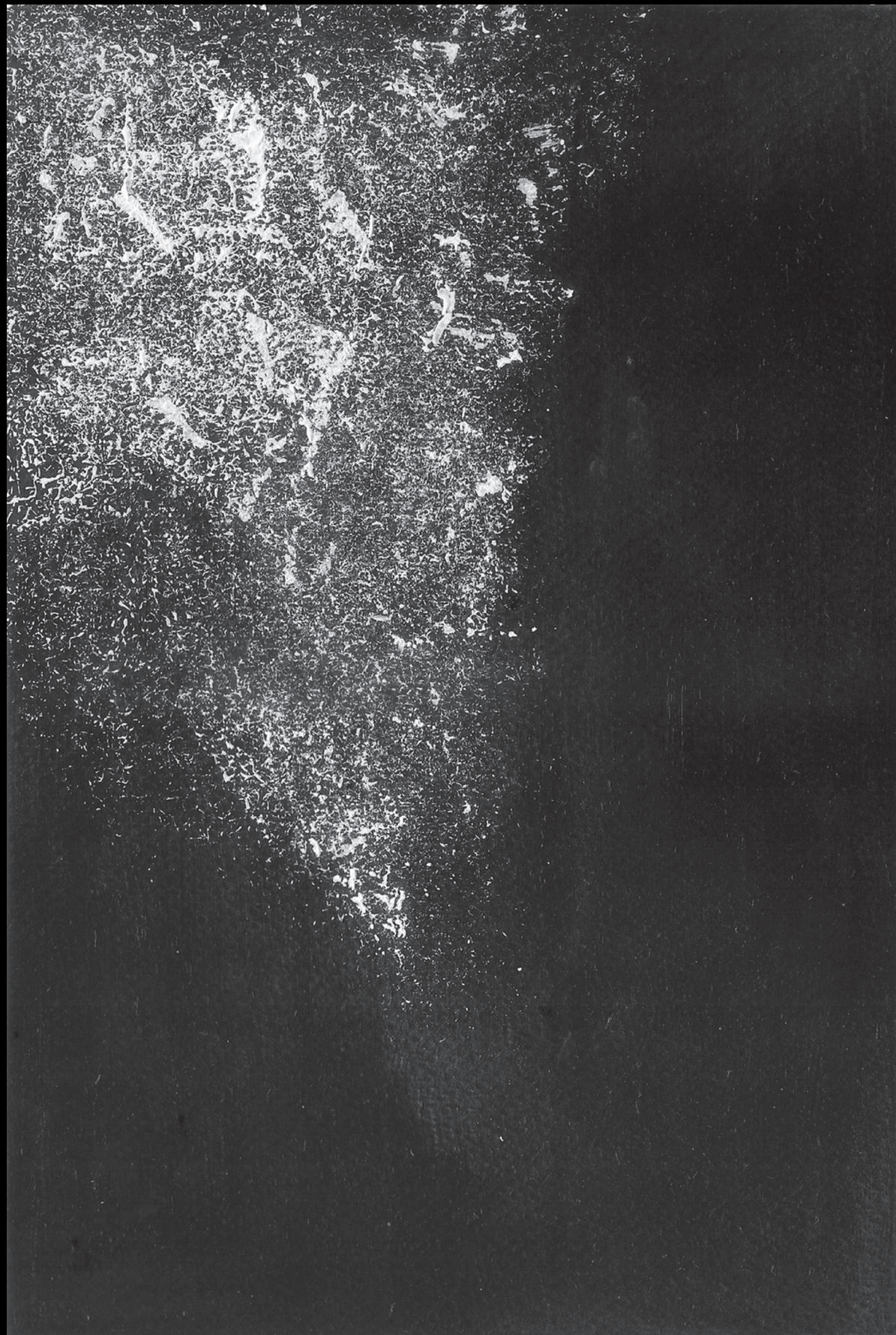




















## LEAVING THE SELF BEHIND

Nathan Snaza

I pull the curtains to block out the light before removing the CD from its jewel case and placing it in my Discman. I adjust the headphones so they're comfortable and then lie down, closing my eyes to make the darkness even more complete. For fifty-seven seconds, a menacing ambience scrapes away at what remains in my head of the day, allowing me to sink into myself. And then it erupts: guitars squealing in ways that never even loosely approach "riffs," a programmed drum track that is regular enough that it should hold the whole thing together, but it somehow doesn't. For the next forty-seven minutes, I try to follow what I'm hearing, but concentration never allows me to find a groove, a rhythm, patterns, anything I'm used to finding in even fairly extreme Metal. It sounds like music—I can identify the instruments even—but it doesn't feel like music; it's disorienting, even scary. My eyes open, I see faint shadows move on the wall that are uncanny, disturbing. My bedroom feels alien, menacing. Rather than turn it off and leave, though, I am pulled further into it, uncertain of where it leads. I can't seem to help myself; this music disables self-control.

I don't know what to think *about* Blut Aus Nord's *MoRT*.<sup>1</sup> It might be more accurate to say that it is an album that, at least for a certain duration, obliterates the "I" that could positively say something about what it thought. Every time I play it—and I only do so when I have an hour completely free of distraction, so I can lie in a darkened room and completely focus on what is coming through the headphones—I come away feeling less like I have experienced something than like I have lost forty-eight minutes. There is only a void, an absence of experience that indexes an interruption of my self.

In this essay, I want to approach this void, not to explain or understand it, but to allow it to resonate against the fabric of common-sense reality in such a way that what I usually call my "self" seems meager, limited, illusory. In an interview with the website *Lords of Metal*, Vindsval (of Blut Aus Nord) was asked: "The subheading of the album [*Memoria Vetusta II*] 'Dialogue With The Stars' implies that you cannot only talk to a star, but that it actually talks back. Do you try and converse with the stars sometimes? What do they



say to you?” He answered: “A dialogue with the stars is the annihilation of the I.”<sup>2</sup> This “annihilation of the I” locates Black Metal as inherently and vehemently antagonistic to familiar Western notions of selfhood and their concomitant concepts of experience and politics. In order, then, to let Black Metal’s annihilation of the self resound as loudly as possible, I will situate it in (antagonistic) relation to the Enlightenment self. Black Metal is a practice of what I shall call, following the French Black Metal band Obscurus Advocam, “Endarkenment.”<sup>3</sup> It is committed to an entirely different self with different politics and different ways of being (or, becoming) in the world.

Listening to Black Metal is not, however, enough to become a different self. That project (which is not a project in the sense of task or *telos* toward which we can work<sup>4</sup>) is too much to ask of any encounter between a listener and a song or album or performance. What it does, however, is create a peculiar form of interference in the maintenance of the humanist, Enlightenment self. For the forty-eight minutes during which I listen to *MoRT*, it is very difficult to remain who I “am.” Afterwards, I return to myself, or rather my self returns to me, but that void nevertheless reveals something: that my “self” is a powerful illusion (Watain will call it a “spell”) cast in order to restrict my attunement to the world and how my psychesoma dwells within it. This attunement is, in opposition to the Western Enlightenment self and its forms of attention, not about light or clarity. There is nothing here to understand. It is, instead, about Endarkenment, becoming dark. The Endarkenment self does not want to exist as a stable, bounded entity closed off from a world about which it accumulates knowledge. It is, instead, committed to the “annihilation of the I.”

In what follows, I begin by developing the idea of interference as both a methodology holding Black Metal and philosophy in tension, and as a way of thinking about the ways that Black Metal affects the listener, producing a “noise” that makes it difficult to sustain an enlightened self while listening. This allows me to pose Black Metal as the pursuit of “Endarkenment,” a turning away from traditional Enlightenment modes of subjectivity and politics. I sketch Endarkenment as an affective attunement to the world that outstrips Enlightenment restriction by considering what French philosophers have called the “outside” in relation to a Nietzschean account of the world as one rife with decay and violence (but also joy<sup>5</sup>). This, in turn, leads me to the ecology—or melancology—anchoring the music of Wolves in the Throne Room, where Black Metal becomes a way of acknowledging the agency of nonhuman actants in the world, something Enlightenment thought entirely disavowed. Finally, I return to the ways Black Metal interferes with the self, forcing listeners to reckon with an “it” (one that is outside) which is the ground of possibility for the emergence of an “I” and which is always *there*, even when an “I” pretends it is not.

## INTERFERENCE

Black Metal theory is a matter of interference, of noise. What is message in one system is noise for another. In order to perceive this, it is necessary to leave a system, or better to find a point at the very borders of the system so that slight shifts in attention can allow you to dwell with the interference.<sup>6</sup> As Cesare Casarino puts this notion to work in *Modernity at Sea*, it means “a certain discontinuous and refractive” relation between two modalities (for him, philosophy and literary criticism).<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, I engage philosophy as if it were Black Metal, and Black Metal as if it were philosophy. Neither one nor the other, but their interference; this essay is an attempt to see what happens when the sonics and attunements of Black Metal and the questioning of philosophy seep into each other, blurring and rotting into something sticky that both attracts and repels.

Interference, though, is much more crucial than an orientation toward methodology; it is also an axiom about the ontology of the world. Casarino: “Being interferes. Being is being-in-interference. Being is always and only embedded in practices. Being is the interference agitating the one and only world of praxis, the one and only world there is.”<sup>8</sup> Such a conception of ontology has its philosophical roots in Heraclitus, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze, but Black Metal encounters it in a practical, lived, even pedagogical register. Black Metal does not need philosophy in order to enact its interferences, nor does philosophy need Black Metal in order to conceptualize it. But the shuttling back and forth, the in-between I am pursuing here, is impossible except by holding Black Metal and philosophy in tension in such a way that what neither can think on its own can be thought.

Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?*, Casarino pursues that which “cannot be thought and yet must be thought.”<sup>9</sup> He writes,

This paradox can be grasped only if each practice is understood as being constantly agitated by the pressures of a formless outside radically distinct from any kind of interiority or exteriority—that is, from any form at all—and as always sharing a boundary with such a chaotic and troubling outside “more distant than any external world because it is an inside deeper than any internal world.”<sup>10</sup>

Black Metal, through a pursuit of what I call Endarkenment, relentlessly pursues this chaotic and formless “outside” (a term to which I return in detail below). But, as Deleuze and Guattari note, the problem for any practice, in this case Black Metal, is to engage this outside, this chaos, without losing itself entirely: “Chaos makes chaotic and undoes every consistency in the infinite. The problem of philosophy is to acquire a consistency without losing the infinite into which thought plunges.”<sup>11</sup> Black Metal revels in the outside, in chaos, but in a way that pulls back from it, as does philosophy.

Or rather, thought has to *slow down* the becomings of the world we call “chaos” in order to make them graspable. Deleuze and Guattari note that “chaos is characterized less by the absence of determinations than by the infinite speed with which they take shape and vanish,” a sentence that could serve as a gloss on Blut Aus Nord’s *MoRT*.<sup>12</sup> In approaching this chaos—in *speeding up* the modulations of Extreme Metal so that they cannot congeal into easily digestible “songs”—*MoRT* interferes with my ability to sustain myself as a listening, understanding subject. If Vindsval’s goal is the “annihilation of the I,” Blut Aus Nord’s sonic practice is more modest: to create enough interference in the affective system of a listener that s/he finds it difficult to sustain a humanist, unified, Enlightenment self for a specific duration. The attention required to follow the almost infinite *becoming* found on *MoRT* siphons off the energy that I would ordinarily expend to maintain my “self” (as Freud has taught us, it takes a lot of work to be sane, well adjusted, and reasonable). Interference is not destruction, but it is a modulation. And it leaves traces, so that the “person” I am after listening to *MoRT* is not exactly the same as the person I was before. I am not enlightened by the experience, but my self has been interfered with in such a way that I move toward Endarkenment. I have been exposed to the always-changing world that forms the material and affective precondition of my “self” but which that self has been taught to disavow because it is too obscure, too dark.

### WHAT IS ENDARKENMENT?

Black Metal is animated by an affective commitment to an “end” that holds the potential to disintegrate Western Enlightenment philosophy and the institutions which have been produced based on this philosophy. By affect, I mean pre- or a-conscious relations among bodies, including between a human body and the sound waves transmitted as music.<sup>13</sup> While affect is not, strictly speaking, feeling (feeling is a conscious backformation that conceptualizes an affect), I am guided here, again, by Vindsval who said, speaking to Bob Furtado at *Invisible Oranges*, that “Black metal is a feeling, not a typical kind of riff, sound or attitude, and this feeling is the essence of our music.”<sup>14</sup> Black Metal is less a particular genre that could be described in musicological terms than a particular feeling, or better an affect, one I am calling Endarkenment. In using this term, I emphatically do not mean the sort of “dark Enlightenment” proposed by neo-reactionary thinkers like Nick Land.<sup>15</sup> It resonates strongly, however, with the project of “dark pedagogy” proposed by Jason Wallin.<sup>16</sup> For Wallin, a commitment to an ecology of dwelling with the contemporary ecological catastrophe requires a new mode of subjectivity, one that necessarily rejects what he calls “egology.” We have to learn to darken our selves in order to darken our politics.

Endarkenment, at the most obvious level, signifies a becoming dark or being *made* dark. I will take as my point of departure Watain’s song “Sworn to the Dark.”<sup>17</sup> My guiding question is: what is the “dark” to which one swears while listening to this song? Asking

this question immediately calls forth a whole metaphysics of Western metaphysics that is as omnipresent in Metal, Black and otherwise, as it is elsewhere. Generally speaking, within the framework of Western Enlightenment thought, the light is knowledge, morality, goodness, purity, the divine, the color white. Darkness then signifies ignorance, evil, badness, contamination and being spoiled, the demonic, the color black. Light is civilization. Darkness is the wilderness and brutality.

So, Endarkenment is, first, about working toward and through an opposition to the Light; it is to pursue evil, brutality, and blackness. We might say, in a way, this is what Darkthrone is after in their recent anthem “Leave No Cross Unturned.”<sup>18</sup> Except, and this exception opens up a ton of problems for thinking through Black Metal philosophy and politics, that a commitment to blackness and to evil cannot *simply* be understood within Judeo-Christian religious traditions, which includes Satanism as inverted Christianity<sup>19</sup> (after all, Satan is a *fallen angel*; see Milton’s *Paradise Lost*). Let us not forget that Lucifer is Latin for “bringer of Light.” Since Satan is no less associated with the light than is Christ (or Plato, etc.), Endarkenment has to be something other than Satanism. I would not say, categorically, that Satanic groups (like those associated with Norma Evangelium Diaboli for instance) are not also committed to Endarkenment. But what I want to call “dark” about these bands is not their Satanism; it is, in fact, despite it. It would be more precise to say that Black Metal discovered this “Endarkenment” by pushing itself *through* Satanism toward something altogether different.<sup>20</sup>

### “SWORN TO THE DARK”

Watain’s song is driving, beginning with a lone, trebly guitar riff and speeding up as it nears the chorus, when the song slows to a pummeling mid-tempo gallop. The lyrics, unlike in most Extreme Black Metal, are not terribly difficult to discern. Erik Danielsson’s voice is pained and hoarse, but it’s neither a Death Metal growl nor a Black Metal howl:

Block not my path! / You futile walls of flesh and blood. / For I have seen your  
structure clear / And I know where to stab. / Right in the heart. / There shall I  
place my dagger / Naught shall veil my sight / But the thickness of the mysteries.<sup>21</sup>

Blast beats propel the song forward as a trebly guitar riff moves back and forth between hyperspeed simplicity and the rousing riff that opened the song. As I move along with the song (something that is virtually impossible to avoid given how catchy this is by the standards of third-wave Black Metal) I am threatened: If I try to “block” the speaker, I will be stabbed in the heart. But before I have time to think about how I would go about blocking his path, even if I wanted to, my situation worsens. The second verse:

So block not my path / Your spells can't fetter me. / Beneath the laws of man / I  
bend not! / For it is holy, The sword I bury in thee. / It is the Lord himself / Who  
commands me.<sup>22</sup>

At the moment Danielsson sings “who commands me,” the song’s relentless move-ment breaks down and shifts toward the slower, but somehow more powerfully driving chorus. Now it becomes clear not only that I don’t know how to block the speaker’s path, but that “the Lord himself” commands the speaker to kill me anyway. And, even if I tried to do something to block him, my attempts are doomed to fail since “beneath the laws of man, [he bends] not.” The music underscores this: as the verse gives way to the chorus, the music repeatedly swells and recedes, giving the impression of being caught in an undertow and mercilessly washed away at sea by a force immeasurably more powerful than your self.

The speaker insists that he is a servant sworn to an absolute dominion of “the Dark” (“It is the Lord himself who commands me!”). Everything about the lyrics suggests a fairly facile inversion of Christianity (dark and light trade places. . . perhaps this is what the third verse calls the “pendulum of radiant conviction”?) If you set aside all the lines that explain *why* the specific actions represented in the lyrics take place, what you’re left with is a song about murder, burning down the world, and escaping (the final verse: “Through raging fire, / Through Death and hail. / Clinging to the Dragon’s tail. / And as the world behind me burns / I ride its wings on paths of No Return.”<sup>23</sup>) I’m more interested in this, at first, than in how the speaker *rationalizes* these actions.

Burning down the world cannot be understood merely metaphorically. No member of Watain (or for that matter, many of their fans) was alive before a time when—at a bare minimum—nuclear bombs and global warming were very real, very everyday kinds of worries. These two things are the logical and demonstrably “historical” products of the so-called Enlightenment,<sup>24</sup> and so in affirming the burning down this world, Watain is indubitably attuned to a force that could break (free) from it. Swearing to the dark is to pitch your energies elsewhere than a path to reasoned control of the social in its entirety. And, for Watain, there is “no return” to the Enlightenment world after this, because “the Dragon’s tail” carries the speaker away. While I want to note that the dragon is an easily decoded ersatz Satan, I think resting with this reading is insufficient. What carries the speaker away—and I keep returning to the *passivity* of the speaker to underline it—is something that all enlightened citizens know is “not real” and also something inhuman. The speaker is affected by a different ontology than the one presumed in enlightened societies. The speaker’s rebellion against the light is, then, not an expression of pure human freedom but of absolute obedience to *what is not real*, to what is not human, and to what carries him toward an altogether different world that will come into being after this one burns down.

The most interesting thing about the song's lyrics is the second-person address. The murder—a sword through heart—in the first few lines is of “you,” because you “block” the speaker's way. The only qualifications the song adds to this “you” is that it can cast “spells” which “can't fetter” the speaker, presumably because, as the next line states, “beneath the laws of man, [he] bend[s] not.” Although I am obviously taking a particular stand on how these lines relate, I want to hazard that the “spells” are not magic, per se, but the binding forces of human, Enlightenment law. One way to think about Enlightenment, in the context of Western European thought in the modern period, is that it was about a free exchange of ideas in order to produce better state policy and law. In other words (and Kant made this very explicit in his answer to the question “What is Enlightenment?”), Enlightenment is about absolute obedience to laws that are freely debated before they take force. Enlightened citizens do what they're told because they trust the commands are *rational*. In other words, this “you” isn't a magician, but any enlightened citizen who desires rational social planning. It's just you, the listener.

As the chorus kicks in and the tempo slows to become a fist-pumping anthem, I cannot ever seem to help but scream along: “Sworn to the dark. . . to the death and far beyond.”<sup>25</sup> The rise and fall of the tsunami-like music propels me directly into the destruction imagined by the lyrics, and the simplicity and clarity of the vocals become infectious. As a listener, you find *yourself* swearing to a “dark” that has sent one of its servants to stab you in the heart. It is to swear to a force that is irrational, inhuman. When I drive down the street screaming “sworn to the dark” and banging my head, I am singing along with my own murderer, championing the force that demands my death.

A sword through the heart seems, for Watain and their visual aesthetics, rather unbrutal. Compared to the deaths described in so many Death Metal songs, this is positively prudish. But I think this is deliberately unbrutal at the level of representation because it could not be more brutal at the level of its performative force. In singing along to these lyrics, in swearing to the dark that would have you dead, you affirm your own death. Remember: you do continue to swear to the dark long after, in the song, you are to have died. You live past your own death every time you sing along to this song, but you only get to live on condition that you affirm the very force of “the dark.”<sup>26</sup>

Let me back up. The “spells” that you have at your disposal to try to block the speaker's path are, as I have suggested, “the laws of man.” In other words, the only force “you” have to counter the speaker and the darkness to which he is sworn are *human* forces, and these are useless here. Your human defenses cannot prevail, so the song (and its incredibly catchy, fist-pumping chorus) encourages you to give up on them. The sword through the heart, then, isn't about “dying” so much as having one's “heart” (or figurative center, guiding principle, etc.) destroyed. In swearing to the dark we want not our actual biological “brain death” but to become something equally unbound to the “laws of man,” something inhuman. The song then asks us less to die than to kill off our urge to be bound by “the laws of man,” to be human.



## OUTSIDE

Black Metal is not the only practice that pushes us to attune to the dark which animates the world. There is a tradition of writing, even within the most enlightened societies, that has grappled with the problems of Enlightenment thought and the obscure realities hidden by its blinding light. We could think here of Charles Baudelaire or Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, or Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot in the early twentieth.<sup>27</sup> These writers all pushed language toward the limits of the Enlightenment project and its narratives, modes of reason, and preoccupations, attuning to the death, decay, madness, and irrationality that lie just outside of or underneath everything civilization values. Writing about the fiction (which is not “fiction” in the usual sense today) of Blanchot and the function of “attraction,” Michel Foucault writes that “to be attracted is not to be beckoned by the allure of the outside; rather, it is to experience in emptiness and destitution the presence of the outside, and tied to that presence, the fact that one is irremediably outside the outside.”<sup>28</sup> What Foucault here calls “the outside” is not something opposed to an inside. It is, rather, what is obscured by humanist, Enlightenment thought. It is always *there* without being accessible as any kind of positive knowledge. It is even the “primal unity” (a phrase I borrow from Nietzsche, to whom I return below) *from which* the Enlightenment self is made, and made in such a way that it *seems* (by a spell, perhaps) to be a distinct, discrete entity. There is only outside. “Interiority” is a ruse.

But it is a powerful ruse, and centuries of accumulated common sense have made it exceedingly difficult to attend to this outside. For Foucault, Blanchot’s fiction does not *represent it*, but his language works against itself in such a way that the reader is affected by it. Blanchot’s fiction

becomes attentiveness to what in language already exists, has already been said, imprinted, manifested—a listening less to what is articulated in language than to the void circulating between its words, to the murmur that is forever taking it apart.<sup>29</sup>

There is something there, here, outside, that cannot appear or be heard inside because, when it comes down to it, there is no inside. The task Blanchot’s fiction takes upon itself is “converting reflexive language” in such a way that it does not prop up the illusion of an Enlightenment self while being powerless to explain or even clearly point to what lies outside of it. Foucault:

It must be directed not toward any inner confirmation—not toward a kind of central, unshakable certitude—but toward an outer bound where it must

continually contest itself. When language arrives at its own edge, what it finds is not a positivity that contracts it, but the void that will efface it. Into that void it must go, consenting to come undone in the rumbling, in the immediate negation of what it says, in a silence that is not the intimacy of a secret but a pure outside where words endlessly unravel.<sup>30</sup>

Although the differences between verbal language and the sonics of Black Metal should not be collapsed, I think Foucault's attempts to understand how Blanchot's fiction attends to this outside are a crucial touchstone for coming to terms with Endarkenment. What Endarkenment requires is a form of attention or attunement to what is, what has always already been, that does not focus on only the "positivity" or knowability of the world. Instead, it attunes us to the "void that will efface" our selves. To borrow a phrase from N.I.L., a project of N. Imperial (a member of Krieg and Twilight), what Endarkenment pursues is "leaving the self behind."<sup>31</sup>

### DEHUMANIZED, WITHOUT EGO

If Endarkenment is about an attunement to a void that creates interference in the liberal, humanist, Enlightenment subject—not doing away with it, but shaking it, making it tremble, straining its resources to the point at which it begins to dissipate—then some of Black Metal's most notorious traits take on a new importance. Black Metal musicians, more than those in any other subgenre of Extreme Metal, have taken on alternative names (such as Ihsahn, Fenriz, Varg, Hellhammer, Azantrius, Wrest, Malefic, Mortuus, Natte-frost, or Vindsval). The goal here is extremely important, even if the results are some-times difficult to take seriously. Black Metal is not played by Enlightenment subjects with individualized (and government recognized) names. The application of corpse paint achieves the same end: these are not living, rational, human beings. Vindsval says: "Blut Aus Nord is a faceless entity, dehumanized and without ego. Personally I'm just a vector between the inspiration and the final result."<sup>32</sup> Black Metal embraces dehumanization and the dissipation of the ego. Indeed, it uses every available means to achieve these ends.

The first album by French Black Metal band Antaeus is called *Cut Your Flesh and Worship Satan*, and its title is the last line in the first song on the album, "Inner War."<sup>33</sup> I think it is mistake to be misled into thinking that this is (simply) about self-mutilation as a form of devil worship. The war is, in fact, to attack the very idea of the "inner" by opening the (illusory) inside to the outside. Blood is, after all, mostly water, water that has circulated on earth since long before anything like "life" was possible. The flowing of blood is less a transgression of a boundary (although from the vantage point of a humanist subject it may appear that way) than a way of attending to the contingency of the boundary. My blood is mostly water that has circled the earth for billions of years. It

has been part of innumerable other bodies. To the extent that “I” am in the first place, it is only because there is already a supporting “it” that is irreducible to me (or any other singular entity). “Cutting your flesh and worshipping Satan” is to experiment with reveling in the outside that is outside the outside, with letting go of the self.

Antaeus here walks something of a tightrope. Horkheimer and Adorno have argued, by turning to the story in *The Odyssey* where Odysseus lashes himself to the mast to hear the sirens, that Enlightenment subjects, driven by a quest for knowledge and a sad mind / body dualism, have long believed in making the body suffer so that the mind can attain Enlightenment.<sup>34</sup> Antaeus could easily be accused here of something similar to the slogan on T-shirts worn by US Marines: “Pain is weakness leaving the body.” But I think this would have to forget the non-experience of Antaeus’s music. Chaotic and violent, there does not seem to be any value placed on knowledge. There is nothing to be gained here, only lost. This is not bleeding as religious tribute, or as attempt at healing. It is bleeding only because it reveals the fragility of a border that common sense tells us is so solid. The ease with which we bleed is a reminder of how little, in fact, we are separated from what is not us.

## PAIN AND MUSIC

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes:

Lyric poetry is dependent on the spirit of music to the same degree that music itself, in its absolute sovereignty, is independent of either image or concept, though it may tolerate both [more literally: it does not need the image or the concept]. . . The cosmic symbolism of music resists any adequate treatment by language, for the simple reason that music, in referring to primordial contradiction and pain [in the heart of the primal unity],<sup>35</sup> symbolizes a sphere which is both earlier than appearance and beyond it.<sup>36</sup>

The primal unity from which humans and their “identities” emerge and of which they are absolutely, is contradictory and painful. In attending to this primal unity, Black Metal discovers the necessity of pain. In pursuing a way of interfering with humanist subjectivity and re-inserting those selves back into the world from which they only appear to emerge, Endarkenment diverges sharply in its aims from hippy, New Age, or even Buddhist ways of seeking this return. Primal unity is not bliss, not happiness, not love: it is violence, but a violence that is of a different order than the violence omnipresent in humanist civilizations (with their wars, poverty, and murders). It is a violence not committed by *types* of beings against *other types*, but a more immanent violence. Asked about how being from France affects Blut Aus Nord, Vindsval responded, “Blut Aus Nord is like the sound of the universe, far from this kind of earthly, petty concerns.” [sic]<sup>37</sup>

Music, for Nietzsche as for Black Metal, offers something that words and even visual arts cannot. One reason is that Enlightenment humanism (which has its origins in what Nietzsche calls the Apollonian in Greek culture) privileges sight. In fact, the metaphors of light and dark only assume their relevance and ubiquity in consequence of this privilege. Hearing is rendered peripheral and denigrated as being a more animal sense (although it is still granted a dignity not afforded to smell). Music, as Nietzsche was to teach Deleuze and Guattari, is not essentially human. If anything, it only pertains to humans insofar as they are (however much they want to disavow this) animals. It is at this point that Extreme Metal's pursuit of brutality attains its political relevance: Metal derives from the animality of the human.

Of course, all music does. But in the same way that all language emerges from a void while it is only the prose of Blanchot (but not only his, of course) that seeks out the void that is always there in order to attend to it. Black Metal has something in common with all musics, but it relates to its musicality in a way that aggressively seeks its undoing. It wants to be pure noise. Of course, this is impossible, since noise is only interference from another system. As Michel Serres reminds us in *The Parasite*, "The bit of noise, the small random element, transforms one system or order into another."<sup>38</sup> Pure noise, then, would be nothing but an entirely different system and would, for that reason, cease to be "noise." For there to be noise, there must be at least two systems, levels, or dimensions.

In basic understandings of communication, there is thought to be a signal to noise ratio: whatever is meaningful (the information or message) has to travel in circuits (or waves, etc.) that create interference, noise. If the noise becomes dominant, the message is irretrievable. In a way, a signal is noise that sheds its noise character by achieving something discernable as meaning through repetition and codification into recognizable patterns. Noise, then, is simply the sound of what is that underlies and makes possible all meaning. Serres:

The noise temporarily stops the system, makes it oscillate indefinitely. To eliminate the noise, a nonstop signal would be necessary; then the signal would no longer be a signal and everything would start again, more briskly than usual. Theorem: noise gives rise to a new system, an order that is more complex than the simple chain. . . The town makes noise, but the noise makes the town.<sup>39</sup>

By pushing their music toward noise, Black Metal bands turn music against its humanist restriction. Noise is outside. Noise is Endarkenment at the level of sonics. If Enlightenment was about meaning and the accumulation of knowledge by bounded subjects, Endarkenment is about noise in the sense of asignifying matter, collision, violence. It comes from contact with a different system, one that touches on the Enlightenment and even makes it possible.

### “I WILL LAY DOWN MY BONES AMONG THE ROCKS AND ROOTS”

The final song on Wolves in the Throne Room’s *Two Hunters* is called “I Will Lay Down My Bones Among the Rocks and Roots.”<sup>40</sup> The song, and its title’s use of the future tense, is a proleptic affirmation of a time to come when the human self will be returned to the earth. The song’s last two lines present this return in a peculiar way: “The quiet hum of the earth’s dreaming is my new song / When I awake, the world will be born anew.”<sup>41</sup> Two things here are immediately remarkable: the earth itself is given a form of consciousness (dreaming) that overwhelms and takes the place of the consciousness of the self, and that self, when it comes back to wakefulness, is inseparable from the *entire world* being “born anew.” For Wolves in the Throne Room, the self and the world are not separate or separable (or at least in the future they will not be), and this blurring at the level of consciousness is related (in the title itself) to a *material* entanglement: when bones, roots, and rocks lie together,<sup>42</sup> something happens.

Speaking with *MetalSucks* in 2009, Aaron Weaver, the drummer for Wolves in the Throne Room, said:

I do feel that something must change. Something extreme is going to happen, certainly in my lifetime and probably in the next 5–10 years. I think you just mentioned the Enlightenment. Talk about an extreme change that completely transformed human consciousness and transformed what was possible for humanity. It transformed our relationship to the world and the universe. I just have this sense that some change like that is on the horizon. I feel this massing sort of energy. My point is I don’t know what it is. I don’t know what the world is going to look like when it is born anew. I don’t really want to speculate necessarily.<sup>43</sup>

This “born anew” world is not something that can be imagined from our present moment due, as he says directly here, to our inheritance of Enlightenment ideas about subjectivity, consciousness, and the human(imal) relation to the world. Rejecting the sort of Satanism that takes demons and snakes as literal embodiments of evil, Weaver locates Wolves in the Throne Room’s spiritual and political commitment as an attempt to move beyond or away from Enlightenment. In other words, they are committed to Endarkenment and what it would mean for an entirely different sense of “what [is] possible for humanity.”

This spiritual and political commitment is also, for Wolves in the Throne Room, immediately practical and material:

We’re very interested in farming as an occult act and understanding the process on an esoteric level. You know the act of putting a seed in the ground and seeing it through the season. There is something to that beyond just the immediately quantifiable reality of it. There is a hidden dimension, and that’s what Wolves in

the Throne Room is attempting to do—to expose and express that hidden occult element to the universe that I think as modern people, we’re often times unaware of or just don’t believe in.<sup>44</sup>

This is not about finding a “new” world, then, but about seeking ways of attuning differently to the world as it is, and to ourselves as embodied beings in and with that world. Enlightenment selves are, according to Weaver, shut off from “a hidden dimension” that is nevertheless there, and Black Metal’s pursuit of Endarkenment has to be, then, about inhabiting this world differently. The reference here to farming is crucial in that the production of food—something increasingly not part of the lives of urban humans during the Enlightenment—is precisely about the ways that human animals, nonhuman animals, plants, and objects like soil, sunlight, and water relate in ecologies. Endarkenment is inseparable from ecology.<sup>45</sup>

For Wolves in the Throne Room, this ecological politics involves not simply a reinsertion of the human back into the material world to which it is vulnerable<sup>46</sup> and upon which it depends, but (as in the lyrics to the song noted above) a radical break with Enlightenment thought in the way it gives agency and even consciousness to nonhumans:

I believe that wheat and other grains have a consciousness and awareness. They have affected the course of human history. I think on one level people are making a very rational decision. “Oh it makes more sense to in order to settle down and cultivate these things and have some modicum of stability and not rely on the caribou herds for our sustenance.” That all makes perfect sense and it is very rational. I also think that there is another energetic layer to that history, and I think that it has to do with the consciousness of the plants that human beings chose to make a pact with.<sup>47</sup>

In a move that resonates with the work of Timothy Morton, Ian Bogost, and others associated with “object-oriented ontology,”<sup>48</sup> Weaver is here glossing the title of their 2009 album *Malevolent Grain*<sup>49</sup> as being a reference to the particular nonhuman forms of agency inhabiting our world. Farming, for Wolves in the Throne Room, is not an end in itself, then, but a means of Endarkenment, of the progressive (and at this stage necessarily imperfect, incomplete, inadequate) moving away from Enlightenment selves and politics.

Niall Scott underscores something similar in his essay “Blackening the Green,” where he considers Black Metal in relation to deep ecology. While black ecology “deni[es] special moral consideration for human beings” and thus “argues for a nonanthropomorphic and anti-anthropocentric position,” it still remains committed to a rational, enlightened, human agent or observer.<sup>50</sup> Black Metal, in this reading, goes further because “a blackening of the green in the removal of the observer” can lead to an



“identification. . . predicated on a sense of unity with the biotic community.”<sup>51</sup> Scott’s account of Black Metal ecology, which emerges in part through engagement with Wolves in the Throne Room, begins, crucially, with the claim that “nature throws us into darkness.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, “blackening the green” is a crucial part of what I am calling Endarkenment.

## ENERGIES, ECOLOGIES, INTERFERENCE

This project of Enlightenment—whether at the level of the individual or a society—takes a lot of energy. It is *hard work* to become enlightened. As Freud revealed with the invention of psychoanalysis, a radically dynamic theory of consciousness and its material (and psychic but not conscious) supports, the Enlightenment self is what physicists might call “dissipative structure”: something that would dissipate without such energistic investment. To put this in terms of popular ecology, the Enlightenment self and its politics are not sustainable.

Black Metal, when it pursues Endarkenment, uses its intense energies to create a kind of interference in the system, creating glitches and temporary failures. It accelerates energy expenditure until it reaches a void, one that cannot (at least on its own) actually “annihilate the I” (in Vindsvál’s terminology), but it can temporarily jam its operations.<sup>53</sup> In doing so, it revels in a kind of death that is, as I said earlier, not brain death but the dying of the illusory self which we have been taught is common sense, all there is. The fact that in listening to Blut Aus Nord, or Watain, or Wolves in the Throne Room, or Antaeus, or many other bands, I can be delivered to a void that is not consciousness restricted to an “I” but is instead an ineffable being affected by the world, means that this consciousness is not all. There is something else there, outside. I am more and other than I think I am. And so is the world.

## FROM I TO IT

One of the few bands signed by Euronymous to Deathlike Silence was the Swedish group Abruptum. Before his murder, Euronymous described the recording sessions by this band: “The guys were torturing each other in the studio. They were whipping, beating, cutting, burning, and pouring boiling water over each other DURING the recording, and you can HEAR it from the music that they were SUFFERING.”<sup>54</sup> One member of Abruptum took on the pseudonym “It,” and I would like to see here a limit case in the Endarkenment pursuit of dehumanized or nonhumanist subjectivity. It is not a subject, not an “I.” There is no localizable, individual agency here. It cannot even be described with personal pronouns: It is the very (grammatical) definition of the impersonal.

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche takes up the relation between grammatical custom and (false) beliefs about ontology in a way that underscores the importance of “It”:

A thought comes when “it” will and not when “I” will. It is thus a *falsification* of the evidence to say that the subject “I” conditions the predicate “think.” *It* is thought, to be sure, but that this “it” should be that old famous “I” is, to put it mildly, only a supposition, an assertion. Above all it is not an “immediate certainty.” In the end even “it is thought” says too much. Even this “it” contains an *interpretation* of the process and does not belong to the process itself. Our conclusion here is formulated out of grammatical custom: “Thinking is an activity; every activity presumes something which is active, hence. . .”<sup>55</sup>

Although much could be said here about how a passage like this one inspired a particular fascination with the impersonal or neuter in French philosophy (and especially with Roland Barthes, Blanchot, and Deleuze), the point here is that for Nietzsche, thought is not something that originates in an “I.” It comes from elsewhere, from outside. Foucault’s phrase “thought of the outside,” then, has to be heard in both senses of the genitive: it is thought that is attentive to the outside (from outside the outside) but only because it is also and at the same time thought issuing from the outside. In Blanchot’s fiction, as in Black Metal’s *Endarkenment*, thought (or better: affect) attempts to reorient an “I” away from its delusional self-containment back to the material, affective, and violent world of its entanglement.

## LEAVING THE SELF BEHIND

Black Metal’s interference puts my “self” back into the blackened cesspool of becoming—both animate and inanimate—that constitutes finite existence. There is, to play with Hunter Hunt-Hendrix’s formulation, nothing “transcendental” here. Instead, there is a siphoning off of energies that plunge my psychesoma further into the immanence of the world from which consciousness only pretends its “transcendence.” There is no outside as an elsewhere, there is only the outside that is always already intimately *here*, out of and in which my “self” is assembled and maintained. There is no light outside. Black Metal goads us toward that outside on a path of *Endarkenment*. In becoming endarkened we don’t begin to inhabit a different world, but rather to dwell in and with this one differently. The difference is darkness.

Taking a cue from Janet Silk’s claim that “Black Metal was born in suicide,”<sup>56</sup> we could even say that *Endarkenment*, as a counter-Enlightenment attunement to and movement toward the outside, is about suicide, but not in the sense of asking listeners to inflict wounds upon themselves that lead to brain death. While Silk sees Suicidal Black Metal’s

“celebration of self-destruction” as a “function” of Enlightenment of the self,<sup>57</sup> I would rather locate its force in terms of affects that make it difficult for that “self” to function. Black Metal celebrates killing off the self. It isn’t about killing yourself so much as killing your self. This is not accomplished, once and for all, by listening to Black Metal, but Black Metal is able to create just enough interference that the self can be suspended, made to recede. By the time the compact disc ends, your self has dissipated and you are a little less you, a little more It.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Blut Aus Nord, *MoRT* (Candlelight Records, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Richard van Gerrevink, “Blut Aus Nord,” *Lords of Metal* 75 (November 2007). <http://www.lsofmetal.nl/en/interviews/view/id/2739>.

<sup>3</sup> Obscurus Advocam, “Endarkenment,” *Verbia Daemonicus* (Battle Kommand Records, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Niall Scott, “Blackening the Green,” in *Melancology: Black Metal and Ecology*, ed. Scott Wilson, (Zero Books, 2014), 65–79.

<sup>5</sup> Apasia Stephanou, “Black Sun,” in *Melancology: Black Metal and Ecology*, 60: “the darkness of the self. . . this emptiness is also a fullness, the light in the darkness, leads to a blackening joy, the joy of the underworld; the *jouissance* of the blackening abyss.”

<sup>6</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrenche Schehr (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 68.

<sup>7</sup> Cesare Casarino, *Modernity at Sea: Melville, Conrad, and Marx in Crisis* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Casarino, *Modernity at Sea*, xvii.

<sup>9</sup> Gille Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?* (Columbia University Press, 1991), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Casarino, *Modernity at Sea*, xix.

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 42.

<sup>13</sup> On affect, see Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual* (Duke University Press, 2002) and John Protevi’s *Political Affect: Connecting the Social and the Somatic* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Bob Furtado, “Interview: Blut Aus Nord’s Vindsval,” *Invisible Oranges*, December 13, 2011, <http://www.invisibleoranges.com/2011/12/interview-blut-aus-nords-vindsval>.

<sup>15</sup> Nick Land, “The Dark Enlightenment,” *Bam! Pow! Oof!*, December 13, 2012, <http://bam-pow-oof.tumblr.com/post/37857338807/the-dark-Enlightenment-the-complete-series-by-nick>. Land’s project is, in fact, almost the inverse of the Endarkenment commitment of Black Metal despite the fact that both see the present world of liberal, consumerist, and democratic politics as the enemy. Land’s proposal for a strong state and absolute sovereignty valorizes precisely those aspects of Enlightenment thought that I see Black Metal as attacking. Endarkenment cannot be committed to state politics.

<sup>16</sup> Jason Wallin, “Dark Pedagogy,” in *The Animal Catalyst: Towards Ahuman Theory*, ed. Patricia McCormack (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 145–176.

<sup>17</sup> Watain, “Sworn to the Dark,” *Sworn to the Dark* (Norma Evangelium Diaboli / Anja Offensive, 2007).

<sup>18</sup> Darkthrone, “Leave No Cross Unturned,” *The Underground Resistance* (Peaceville Records, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> See John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (W.W. Norton, 2004), as well as Neil Forsyth, “Satan,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Paradise Lost*, ed. Louis Schwartz (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 17–28.

<sup>20</sup> Philosophically, we could say that Satanism's capture of darkness reduces it to Light's dialectical opposite. Endarkenment pursues a darkness that is nondialectically determined and ontologically *other* (in the direction of what Foucault and Deleuze have called "outside"). I return to this below.

<sup>21</sup> Watain, *Sworn to the Dark*, liner notes, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Watain, *Sworn to the Dark*, liner notes, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Watain, *Sworn to the Dark*, liner notes, 6.

<sup>24</sup> See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) and Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," in *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009), 197–222.

<sup>25</sup> Watain, *Sworn to the Dark*, liner notes, 6.

<sup>26</sup> Here we can think of many other particular examples of this in Suicidal Black Metal (Leviathan and Shining come immediately to mind). See Janet Silk, "Open a Vein: Suicidal Black Metal and Elightenment," *Helvete* 1 (punctum, 2013), 5–19.

<sup>27</sup> These four are listed not because they are the only sources but because of the direct influence they have had on the thought of Foucault and Deleuze, whose notion of "outside" I draw on here.

<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, "Thought of the Outside," *Foucault / Blanchot* (Zone Books, 1990), 27.

<sup>29</sup> Foucault, "Thought of the Outside," 25.

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, "Thought of the Outside," 21–22.

<sup>31</sup> N.I.L., "Leaving the Self Behind," *N.I.L.* (Battle Command Records, 2007).

<sup>32</sup> Bob Furtado, "Interview: Blut Aus Nord's Vindsvæl," *Invisible Oranges*, December 13, 2011, <http://www.invisibleoranges.com/2011/12/interview-blut-aus-nords-vindsvael>.

<sup>33</sup> Antaeus, "Inner War," *Cut Your Flesh and Worship Satan* (Baphomet Records, 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> Golffing's English translation leaves out this bracketed text. The (original?) German reads: "Der Weltsymbolik der Musik ist eben deshalb mit der Sprach auf den Urwiderspruch unter Urschmerz im Herzen des Ur-Einen symbolisch bezieht, somit eine Sphäre symbolisiert, die über alle Erscheinung und vor aller Erscheinung ist."

<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy and Genealogy of Morals* (Anchor, 1956).

<sup>37</sup> Bob Furtado, "Interview: Blut Aus Nord's Vindsvæl."

<sup>38</sup> Serres, *The Parasite*, 21.

<sup>39</sup> Serres, *The Parasite*, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Wolves in the Throne Room, "I Will Lay Down My Bones Among the Rocks and Roots," *Two Hunters* (Southern Lord Records, 2007). See Timothy Morton, "At The Edge of the Smoking Pool of Death: Wolves in the Throne Room," *Helvete* 1 (2003), 21–28. Of this particular song, Morton writes: "Rocks and roots—human or inhuman; living or dead; organic or inorganic?" (24).

<sup>41</sup> Wolves in the Throne Room, "I Will Lay Down My Bones Among the Rocks and Roots," *Two Hunters*. On *Encyclopaedia Metallum*, [http://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Wolves\\_in\\_the\\_Throne\\_Room/Two\\_Hunters/529724](http://www.metal-archives.com/albums/Wolves_in_the_Throne_Room/Two_Hunters/529724).

<sup>42</sup> See Philip Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes Toward Death over the Last Thousand Years* (Vintage, 1982) and Paul Barber, *Vampires, Burial, and Death* (Yale University Press, 1988). Burial practices in Europe evolved in ways that seek to prevent precisely this material mixing: caskets, embalming, and all the features of modern burial seek to preserve the Enlightenment subject's individuality and separation from the world even after death.

<sup>43</sup> Satan Rosenbloom, "Wolves in the Throne Room Drummer Aaron Weaver on Black Metal as Protest Music, Why Scion is Satanic, and the Giant Wolf Chasing the Sun," *Metal Sucks*, March 19, 2009, <http://www.metalsucks.net/2009/03/19/wolves-in-the-throne-room-drummer-aaron-weaver-on-black-metal-as-protest-music-why-scion-is-satanic-and-the-giant-wolf-chasing-the-sun>.

<sup>44</sup> While “expose and express” may betray some Enlightenment belief in bringing everything into the light of knowledge, the words’ prefix “ex” means outside or away from, and the roots signal force and power. Weaver is actually quite careful here, then, in that these words can be taken to signal a way of registering the outside without capturing it in Enlightenment logic and rationality.

<sup>45</sup> In the same interview, Weaver says: “It’s rooted in the idea that we need to destroy the modern worldview and its one dimensional understanding of reality. We need to destroy the notion that the only way to understand phenomenon is through that which is immediately quantifiable through a scientific process. It’s a really extreme and radical idea. That’s why we’re so interested in it because that extreme demand that you hear in black metal dovetails with our own interest in deep ecology and with radical environmentalism and radical ecology.”

<sup>46</sup> I use this word here in the sense it is given by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* (Verso, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Satan Rosenbloom, “Wolves in the Throne Room Drummer Aaron Weaver on Black Metal as Protest Music, Why Scion is Satanic, and the Giant Wolf Chasing the Sun,” *Metal Sucks*, March 19, 2009, <http://www.metalsucks.net/2009/03/19/wolves-in-the-throne-room-drummer-aaron-weaver-on-black-metal-as-protest-music-why-scion-is-satanic-and-the-giant-wolf-chasing-the-sun>.

<sup>48</sup> See Morton, “At the Edge of the Smoking Pool of Death” and *Hyperobjects*. See also Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology: Or What it’s Like to be a Thing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Wolves in the Throne Room, *Malevolent Grain* (Southern Lord Records, 2009).

<sup>50</sup> Niall Scott, “Blackening the Green,” in *Melanchology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology*, 66.

<sup>51</sup> Scott, “Blackening the Green,” 65.

<sup>52</sup> Scott, “Blackening the Green,” 66.

<sup>53</sup> As Susan Cusick has noted, the United States military seems to understand this, which is why they have put Metal and Noise music to use in torture programs. “Music as Torture / Music as Weapon,” *Trans 10* (2006), <http://www.sibetrans.com/trans/article/152/music-as-torture-music-as-weapon>.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Nelson, “The Black Market: The Month in Metal, July 2014,” *Stereogum*, July 30, 2014, <http://www.stereogum.com/1694370/the-black-market-the-month-in-metal-july-2014/franchises/the-black-market>. In this thought piece, prompted by Myrkur—a Danish one-woman Black Metal project who released a debut EP on Relapse Records in 2014—Michael Nelson quotes Dan Swanö, who recorded the albums with Abruptum, saying that actually “it was fun.” The truth or falsity here, though, doesn’t change my point above.

<sup>55</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Gateway, 1955), 18–19.

<sup>56</sup> Silk, “Open a Vein,” 5.

<sup>57</sup> Silk, “Open a Vein,” 5.

## MAX KUIPER

(1)

*from 'z\w\a\r\t\24' - oct. 2015—.*

*z\w\a\r\t is among the artists that are invited to 'trans-  
mute24', to make site-specific work in\about a military building  
that is now abandoned, leaking, and decaying.  
this digitally transformed photo will be printed and placed in the  
building so that the decay will alter the print.*

(2-4)

*from Z\W\A\R\T magazine 5 - 'Night Views' - jan. 2013.*

*images printed on paper,*

*baptised in black water.*

*the language of silence and the silencing of language*

*melting together.*

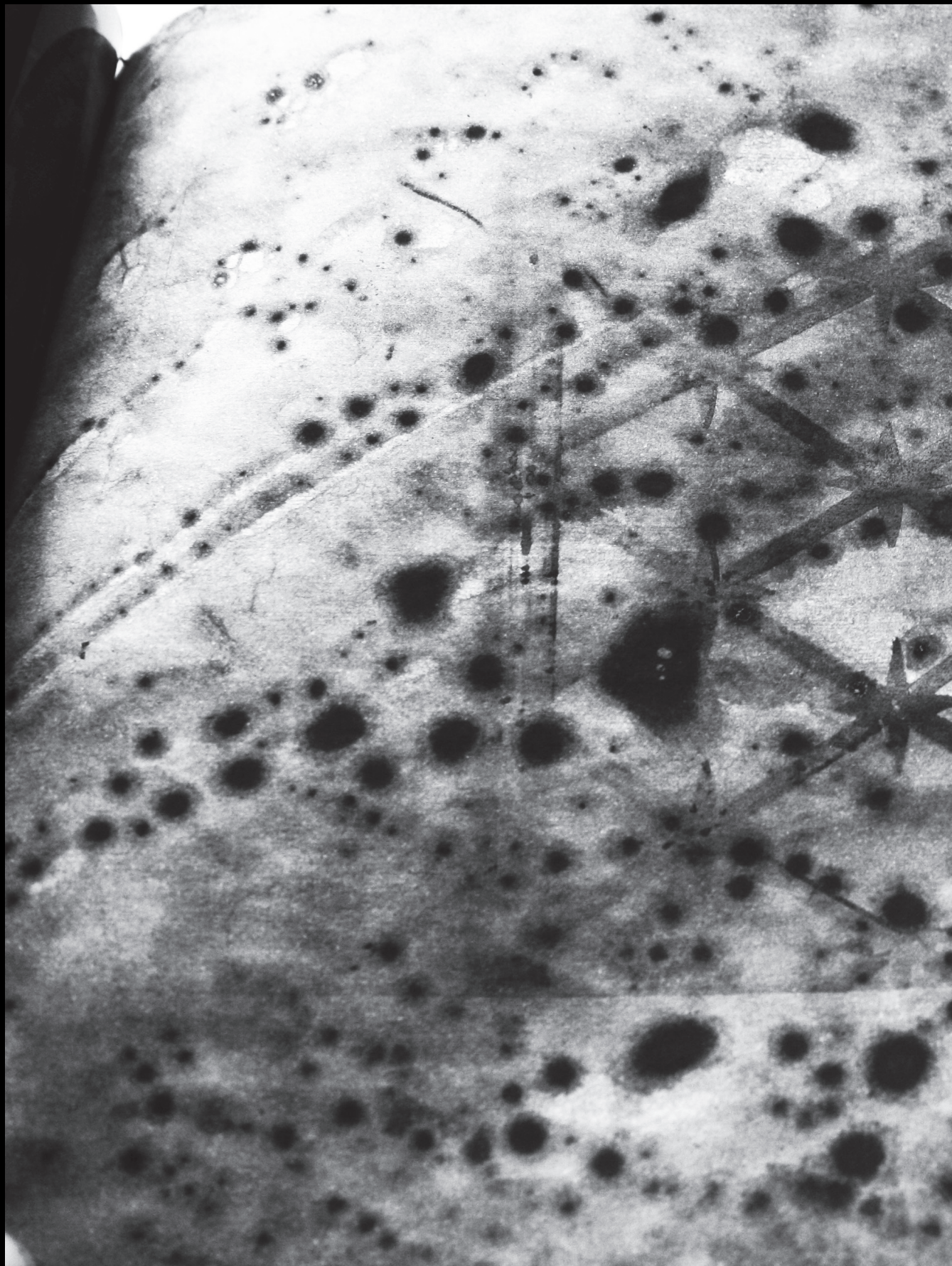




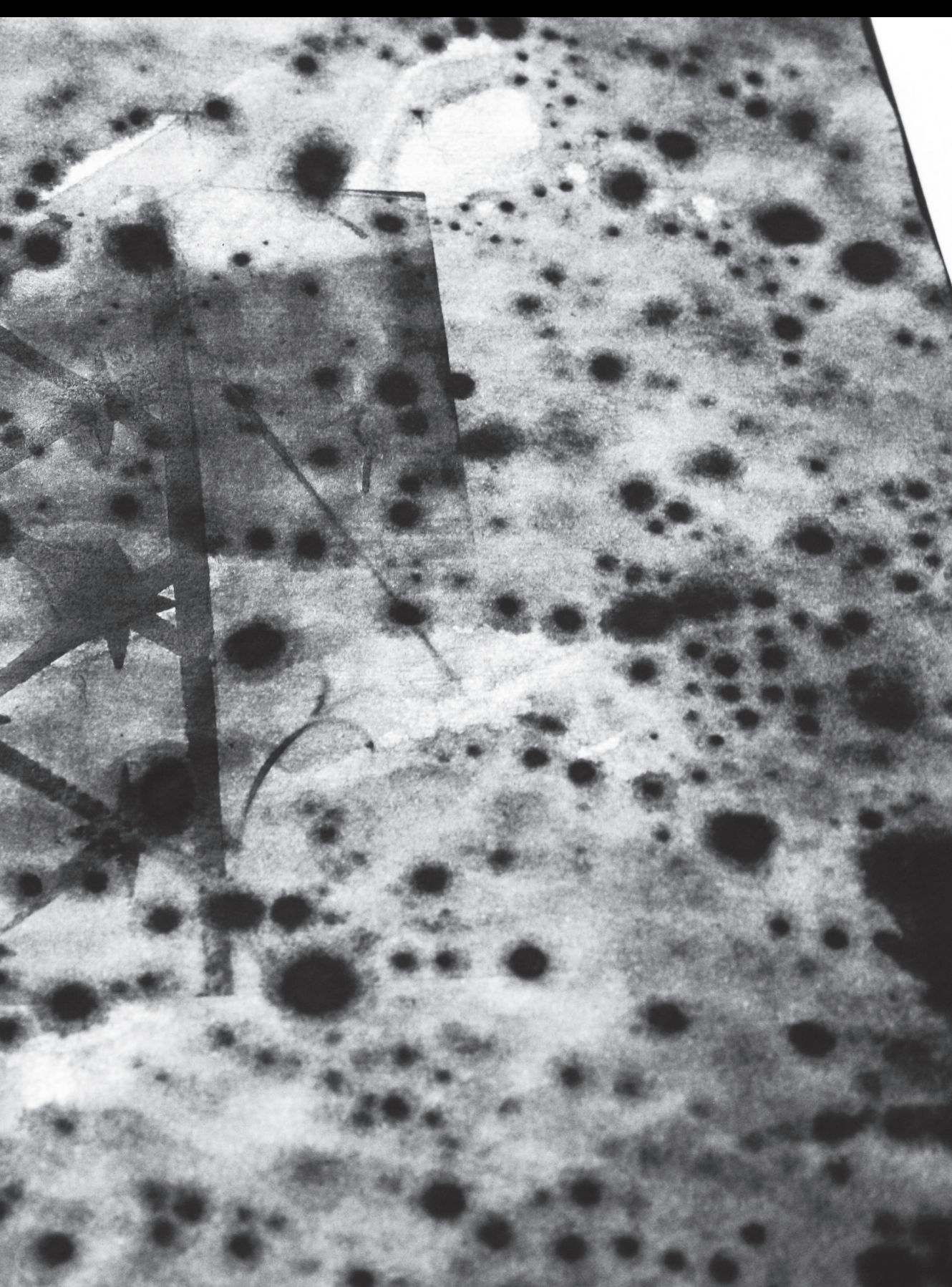




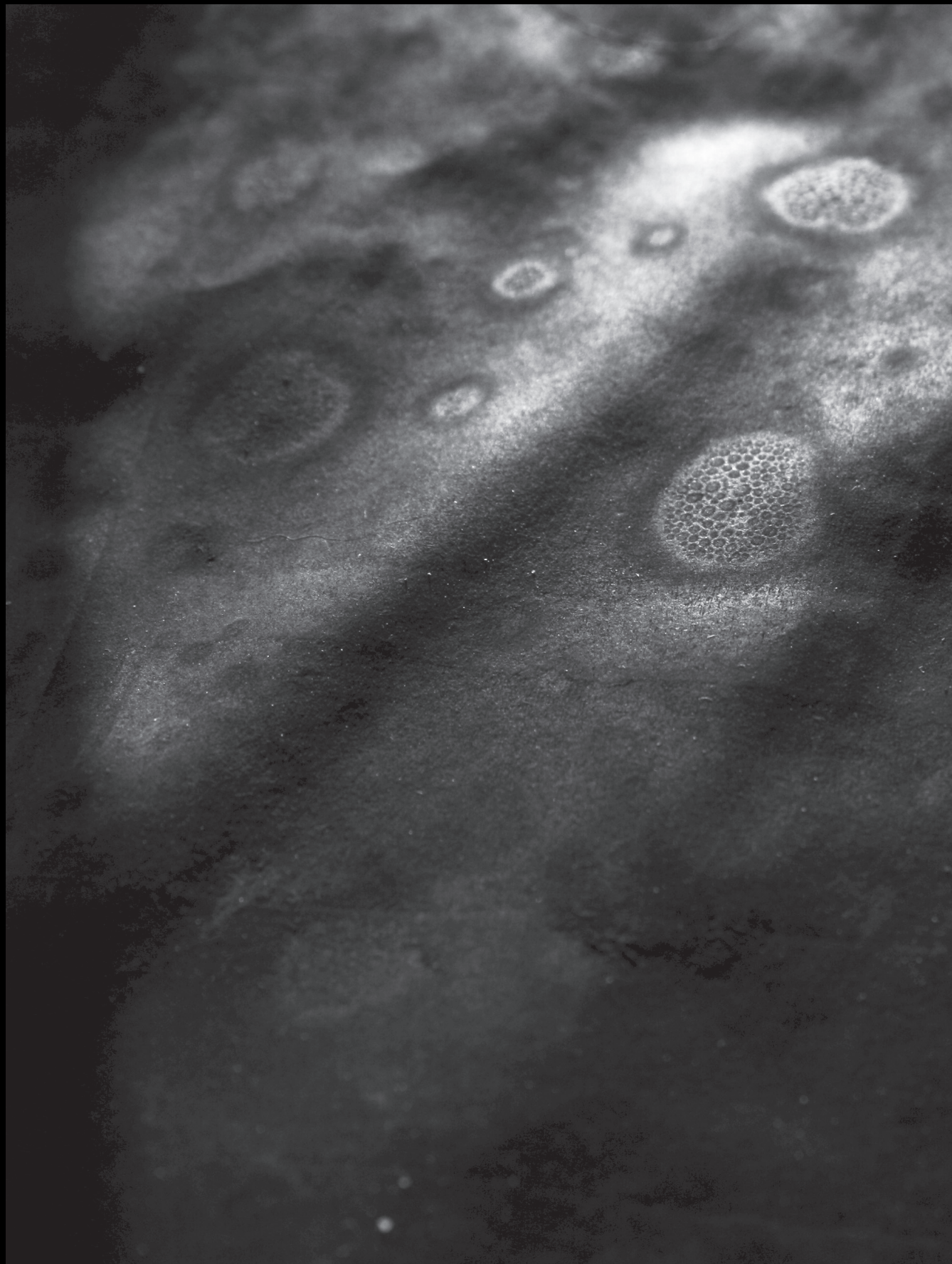








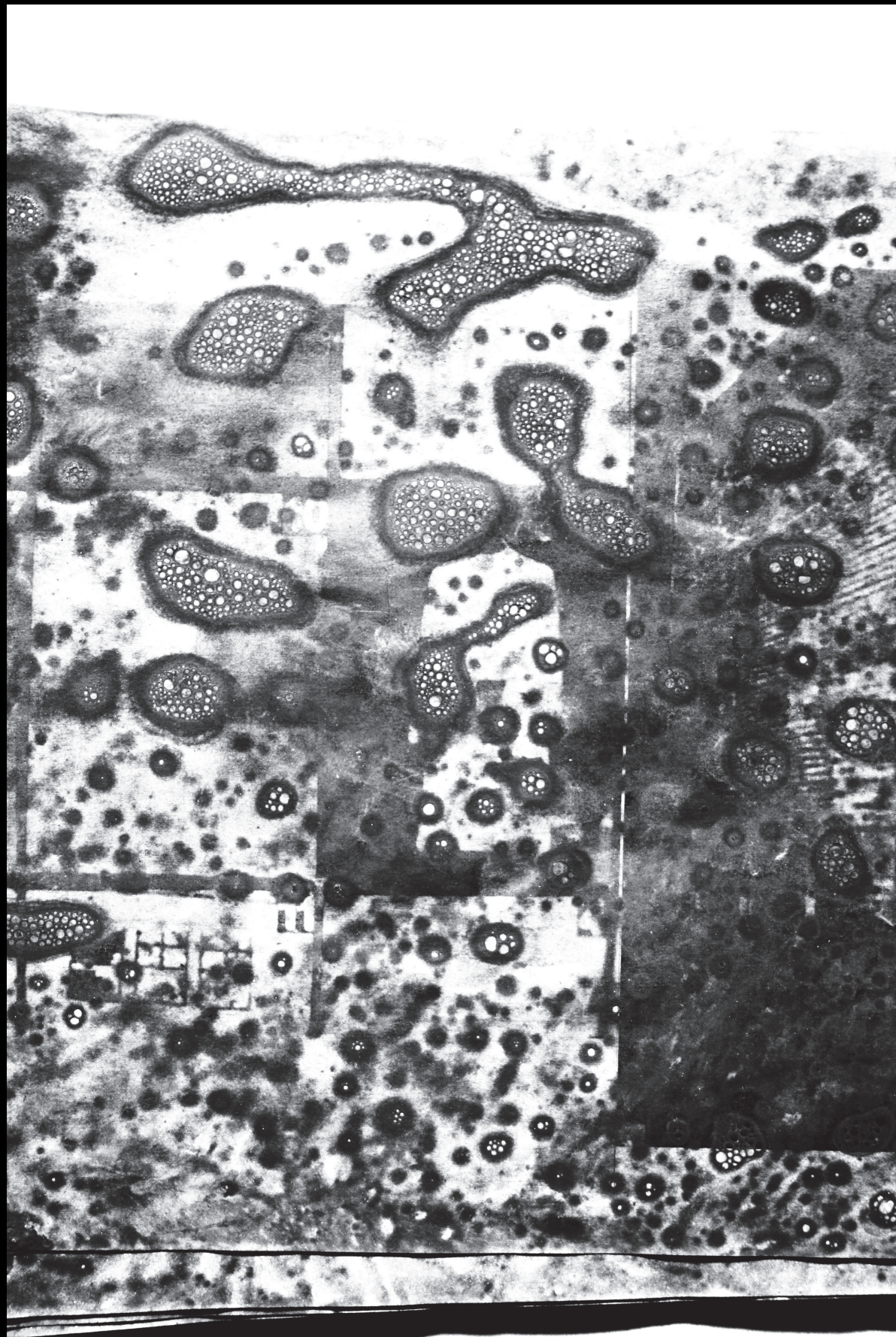














## FALSE ATONALITY, TRUE NON-TOTALITY

Bert Stabler

Any musical scale relies on an intuitive recognition of transparency. While minor scales tint the symmetric interchangeability of notes with wistful or tense uncertainty, major chords stand by to offer relief with their confident declarations of reassurance—perhaps nowhere more palpably than in the imperturbable self-assurance of canonical Classical music. This confidence exudes authority, which is why adding harmonic complexity to tonal music gives us the sweeping, oppressive grandeur of Wagner, movie soundtracks, and (ultimately) Melodic and Power Metal, Militaristic Death Metal, or the more pastoral strains of Black Metal. A note sings out purposefully when a bell is struck, like armor repelling a blow, and this note announces itself against every other sound, precisely because there is just such a background against which it can be defined. Our life-world is a drone, a hiss, a rumble, a field of noise. A seething haze of distortion suffuses most of what is instantly recognizable as Black Metal. But is it the monotone of totalization or the roar of rupture? Is noise pure or impure, or just nothing in particular?

The theory of noise was debated by Seth Kim-Cohen and Christoph Cox in the letters column of *Artforum* in January 2010. The discussion was instigated by Kim-Cohen's critical review (published in the November 2009 issue) of Doug Aitken's *Sonic Pavilion*, a small hilltop building and permanent sound installation at Inhotim, Brazil—which was the realization of an untitled piece Bruce Nauman proposed in 1969, consisting of these instructions: "Drill a hole about a mile into the earth and drop a microphone to within a few feet of the bottom. Mount the amplifier and speaker in a very large empty room and adjust the volume to make audible any sounds that may come from the cavity." Cox subsequently summarized Kim-Cohen's complaint as an argument against the "hopeless and intractable naiveté prevalent among sound artists: the belief that sound is able to deliver a noumenal essence of the world." Cox quotes Aitken, describing the notion of time in *Sonic Pavilion* as "'a moment that doesn't rely on past or future,' a moment with 'no beginning and no end.'" Kim-Cohen, Cox believes,

“radically misconstrues the notion of time at stake in the minimalist tradition, which he associates with the epiphany of the instantaneous ‘now,’” rather than understanding it as “boundless duration and perpetual becoming.”

Drilling down (as it were) to the epistemological level, Cox quotes Kim-Cohen’s claim that, in opposition to the sonic essentialism he decries, “meaning does not simply inhere within the in-itself, regardless of whether it is the thing-in-itself or sound-in-itself. Meaning is only ever produced by the frictions between things.” To this, Cox replies: “It’s not clear whether he believes shifting tectonic plates make no sound, that the sound they make is unavailable to us, or that this sound is uninteresting and unaesthetic because it is nonhuman.” For his part, Cox associates *Sonic Pavilion* with musical and sound-art forebears who “sought a music that would reveal the fundamental affinity of human beings with the natural forces, rhythms, and durations that precede and exceed them.” From this orientation to naturalism and realism, he asserts that sound art “short-circuits the aesthetics of representation and mediation and instead affirms an aesthetics of force, flux, and resonance.” Cox closes with a statement by Deleuze and Guattari that “thinking takes place in the relationship of territory and the earth.”

Kim-Cohen’s response to Cox draws on Derrida—rejecting the desire for the organic totality that he perceives as motivating Cox’s aesthetics, and positing instead that “(e)very meaning, every entity, is corrupted—and at the same time constituted—by the specter of its absence, by the potential of its being consumed by adjacent meanings or entities.” Kim-Cohen questions Deleuzian naturalism on this basis, asking: “If all is flux, how can anything be made, thought, or done? . . . What can be done with—and in—the force, flux, and resonance of experience?” Kim-Cohen concludes derisively, “Doug Aitken’s *Sonic Pavilion*, like so much art involving sound, attempts to deny its provisional status and to assert itself as a direct, unmediated conduit to a transcendental reality that precedes request.”

Cox may be right to describe the appeal of noise in the rather metaphysical terms he uses, and Kim-Cohen may be right to object to this seduction. Much of Black Metal derives its potency from just the lack of interest in getting-anything-done that Kim-Cohen maligns, a uselessness that relates to a release from language. And so, the appeal of force, flux, and resonance comes from opacity; dwelled upon as things-in-themselves, as Kant said, the components of reality ignore the understanding that seeks to paraphrase and instrumentalize them. And so, since harmonics are transparent, noise must be opaque. But can that opacity be a surface that *hides* the way ears and sound waves correspond? Despite the constant imagery of carnage and conquest, invocations of pagan worship, and oaths of Satanic skepticism, Black Metal (as music, or as accumulated sounds) evokes the formlessness of physical and mental background buzz, at the same time as it attempts to be an anthem, a hymn, or a retort. The romance is of erotic submission, mystical nihilistic ignorance—seeing in the universe “nothing but a spider

or spit,” to quote Georges Bataille. But is the music just there to be destroyed, to enact a fantasy of blissful nothingness, or is the noise a decorative element for a rousing martial chant?

One problem with the duel above might be that Cox’s becoming and Kim-Cohen’s deferral are not utterly distinct processes; another might be that each critic has his own idealistic inconsistencies. Noise isn’t a self-contained, locatable phenomenon; trees falling in empty forests, a single clapping hand, and someone screaming in a sound-proof-glass box all make no noise. And so we are back with the problem of things and their relations. Is silence a (perfect) sound? Is noise a lack of music? Is it sound *as such*? Even if we split (or sublate) the “difference”—and talk about a “non-All” (one of Žižek’s soundbites of Hegel) versus a primordially generative but unknowable “earth” that is distinct from the experienced “world” of stable meanings (Heidegger)—how do we single out just one of the innumerable possible experiences of enjoying aural chaos? How is Black Metal not Jimi Hendrix burning his guitar, or microtonal experimentation, or Shoegaze, or any number of Folk traditions or Industrial subgenres, or Free Jazz, or Musique Concrète, or field recordings, or No Wave, or Krzysztof Penderecki, or sound art?

Perhaps we wish Black Metal had abandoned harmonic music, rather than, like Free Jazz, expanding the possibilities of harmonic music—a wound in the cosmos, rather than a pyre of triumph. Of course it hasn’t, though; Black Metal’s invocation of chaos allows deformed reverberation and dissociative distortion but yokes it to a rigid, claustrophobic, and filigreed musical cage of flattened supertonics and parallel fifth chords. Metal shares modes with numerous Folk music traditions—thus, on another level, connecting the droning din to Heidegger’s “earth,” to a nostalgic yearning for wholeness not unrelated to fascism. This tyranny of tropes allows the policing of “true” and “false” Metal, and allows Black Metal to anchor its noise-phallus in this pseudo-earth, reciting vitalistic totality rather than enacting violation, manufacturing atmospherics that foreground New Age’s latent wrathful energies (recall the curious evolution of Ulver). While Black Metal hopes to evoke leftover radiation from the Big Bang (like radio and television static) or the ancient poisonous corpse-sludge of petroleum (à la Reza Negarestani), the familiar roar is of the throng and its bloody flag flapping turgid in an icy gale, visible by the dim embers of an incinerated basilica.

The solution for Black Metal’s noise problem is not so much oddball-fusion concepts (though the NPR Rock critics will lap those up), but, perhaps, Metal that follows through on its heretical promise by delivering a moan rather than a roar, a crowd without purpose or center, without specific hostilities, without the collective identity of even a horde or a mass. It could be that Black Metal has sold out its promise, and that the solution is not necessarily the route of weird acoustic or electronic variants, but Black Metal that does what it promises: Black Metal that offers the sounds of a moaning crowd with no purpose or center, lacks specifically directed hostility, and is neither an



army nor a battle, not even a horde or a mass. The ridiculous cacophony of bands that the Aquarius Records website introduced to me as “Brown Metal” seems to carry through on this truly nihilistic vision. The experience of listening becomes monstrous, thus purely sadistic and funny, when I hear Dead Reptile Shrine, Lugubrum, Botanist, Abruptum, or Botulistum. Like Kim-Cohen’s characterization of Cox, however, I remain in denial with regard to provisional, arbitrary disruption, and would rather continue prostrating ecstatically in the same filthy church to the same goat-faced war-god, compulsively replaying the same old bastardized sublime, the same bastardized faux-organic non-All of Absu, Hate Forest, Deathspell Omega, Katharsis, Satyricon, Funeral Mist, 1349, Drudkh, etc. Still, I suspect that what is “true” is truly false, and what is “false” is perhaps true.

All this was either upended or counterintuitively confirmed for me in a November 11, 2014, post by Otrebor Illenitram of Botanist on *The Hooded Utilitarian* (a blog to which I also contribute). Otrebor doesn’t share any of my qualms about the rigid formalism of Heavy Metal pleasure; in his piece “Dimmur Paganini,” he discusses the kinship of Metal with Classical music, and (in particular) the important and under-appreciated contributions of Yngwie Malmsteen, Hard Rock’s answer to Liberace. Otrebor praises the virtuoso performances of Windham Hell and Virgin Black—the former something of a Power Metal concept band with a Twin Peaks thematic in their lyrics, and the latter a doomy, operatic gothification of Opeth. He rapturously describes witnessing firsthand the vocal prowess of Virgin Black frontman Rowan London, his admiration of the recordings turning to stupefaction with “the realization that when I was blown away at the sweeping, crushing beauty of the compositions and vocals of ‘Requiem - Mezzo Forte’ and its seeming choir of singers, it seemed I had in fact been hearing the work of a man who was somehow a soprano and a tenor.” A virtuoso is always a mutant, radiantly unknowable. The counterpoint to this awe before sonic architecture is the sublime act of unsettling it, as when Adem Merter Birson writes about the disruptive effect of overlooked dissonances lurking in Haydn’s early quartets. Every form is recognizable in its resemblance to other forms, and yet, if it had no form, how could anything about it be unrecognizable, and therefore sublime? In its availability to our ears, compositions of subtle artifice may yield more nothingness than the shifting plates of the earth.

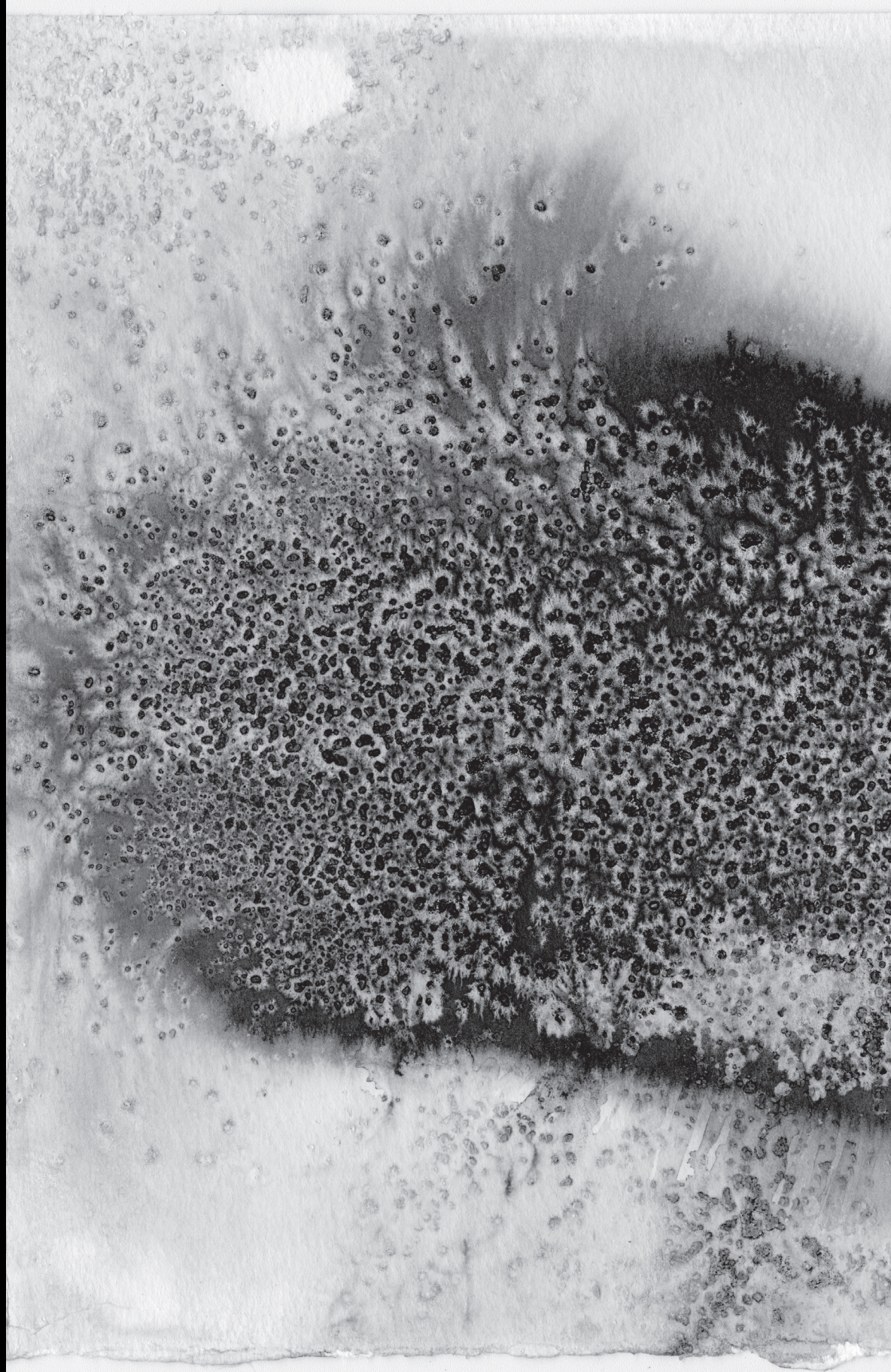
## FAITH COLOCCIA

*ink and salt painting, 12 x 9"*

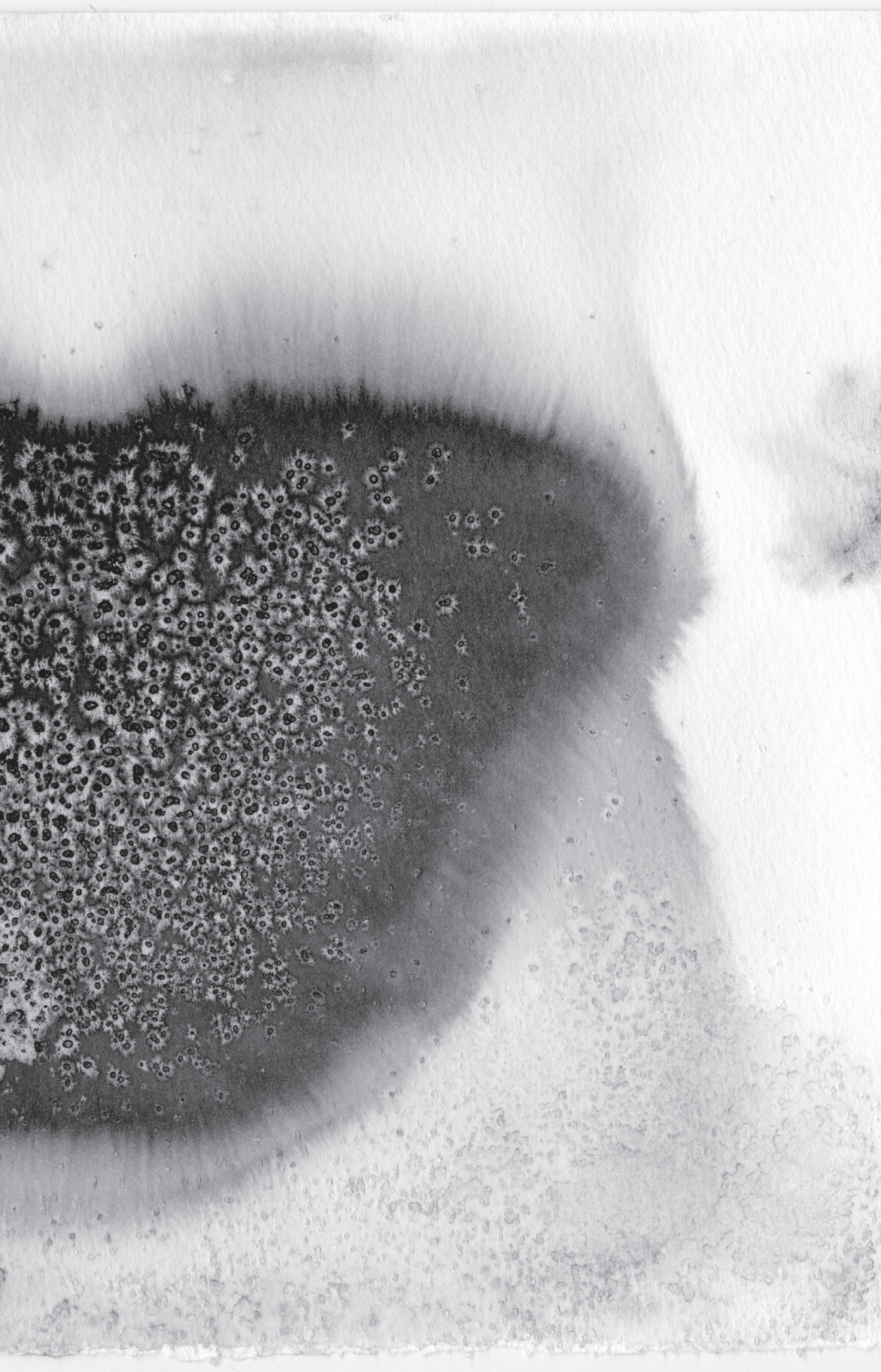
*ash, charcoal, and salt painting, 6.5 x 5.5"*

*ink, ash, salt, and gesso painting, 12 x 9"*

*ink, ash, salt, and gesso painting, 12 x 9"*















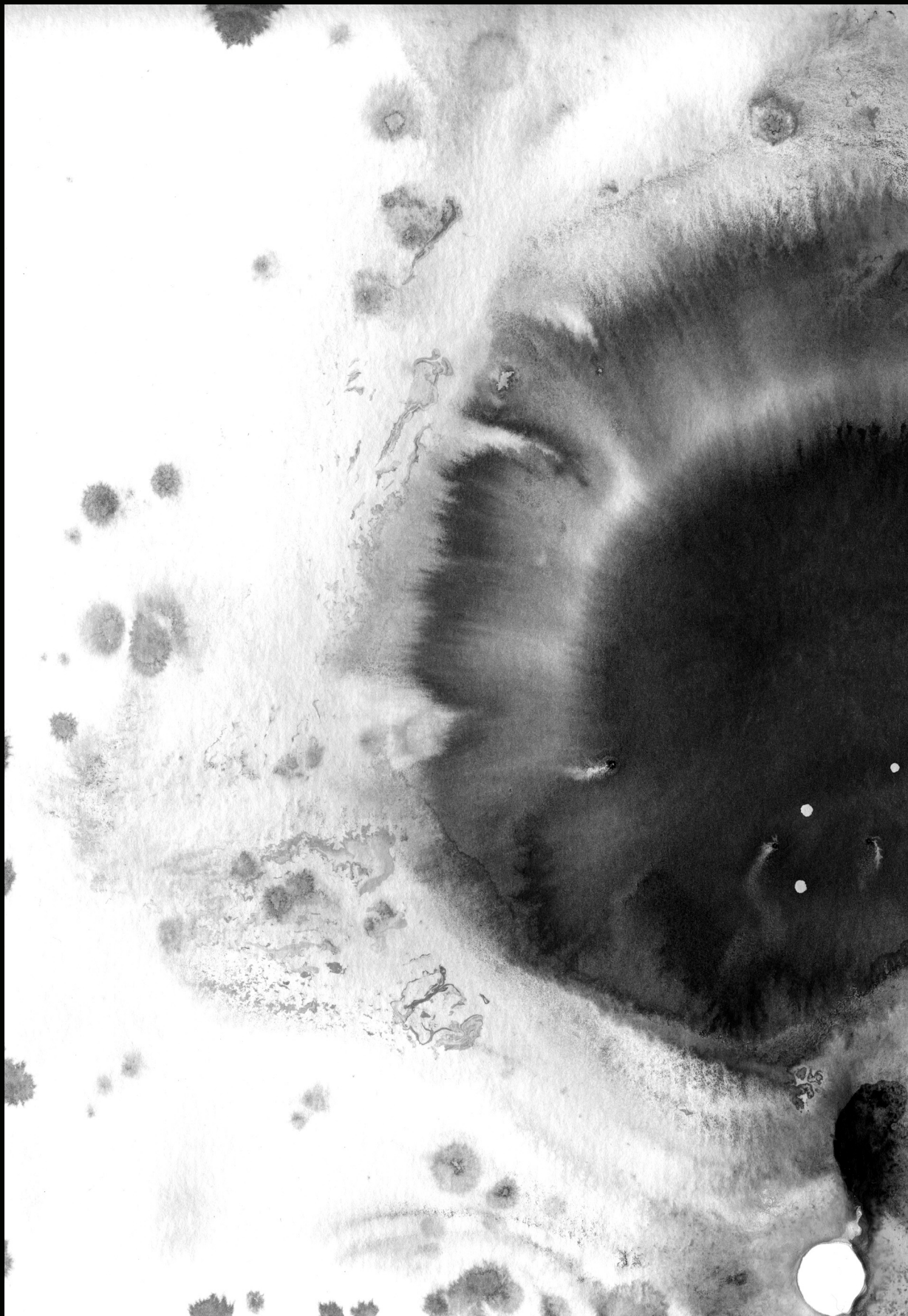




















# NONEVENT

## Grotesque Indexicality, Black Sites, and the Cryptology of the Sonorous Irreflective in T.O.M.B.

Kyle McGee

### I. DEATH, THOUGHT, NOISE

Thought is a corrosive force. Its systems are mere byproducts, remainders of what it has passed through, cinders: residues lingering uselessly, castles of ash ever ready to scatter when the winds change direction. If *noise*—not speech, not information—is its only possible adequate aural iteration, or reflection, or record, *Black Noise* registers its deformed, hyperbolic, sinister underside, its recursive nightmare of self-abuse, depthlessness, radical dissonance, arrhythmia, and untruth. Black Noise is the voice of thought as death, utterable only by the undead and the inorganic: the morbid exclamations of gnarled wood, battered stone, and rusted iron—exclamations that compose what I will call *black sites*—exhibit a kind of active perishing rather more threatening than the kind envisioned in Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality*, disclosing (with apologies to Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think*) exactly how cemeteries and abandoned processing plants, schoolhouses, sanitariums, prisons, and other industrial death factories “think.”

The medium of noise is the expressive residuum: part of all sound, receding ground of all communication, essential ingredient of all information, the pluriversal hum of diverging states and series, infinitely dispersed and virtually imperceptible, routes through the Expressed, infiltrates it, invades it, conditions it, transforms it. As an artistic practice, noise is sonic unbinding, the sound of bonds dissolving into anonymous, shape-shifting masses, constructing a fractured geometry of alien intensities. The noise-work captures the wholesale dissolution of musical form, meaning, *logos*, and this is precisely what allows the Black Noise act T.O.M.B. (Total Occultic Mechanical Blasphemy) to occupy a bizarre position within the discourse and

practice of noise, for in these works uncannily coherent—if inconstant and threateningly dissonant—figures madly proliferate. In T.O.M.B., noise doesn't cease to be aseptic, as meaningless as the fault lines inscribed by tectonic plate movements in the crust of the earth or as pointless as any warped symbol devised by Henri Michaux, but nevertheless finds itself deployed in (aborted, fragmented, self-undermining) signifying strategies: stratification, figuration.

Noise is not heard or listened to—it is inhabited. The noise-work's particular distributions of proximities and vectors, overlapping zones, crystallizations and sequences resist ordinary consumption practices. They demand to be diagrammed within a provisional dynamic sonorous territory established in the physical milieu of the encounter with the work. To ask, "what are the waves, walls, currents, paroxysms, holes, ripples, and other movements within the composition, and how do they stand together, if they stand together at all?" is to move far beyond the dubious ethic of "deep listening."<sup>1</sup> How many variable distributions do we detect within the work? They are disparate and non-recurring, or they are equivocal, or they are looping and recursive, or they are self-consuming, or they are cumulative, or... Such works institute a psychogeography that is non-localizable, non-specific, but mercilessly singular, and to encounter them is to map these distributions (whether or not you ever write about it), occupy the sonorous territory, cohabitate with the musical or non-musical beings and figures that precede you and lie in wait: the acephalic experience of a non-thetic and non-correlational thought, of the vague terror and suffocating *closeness* of things. There is no alternative to listening, of course, but depth promises only a plunge into psychic formations, listener-response, fantasy; the challenge of noise goes unmet, its intensive cartographies left abandoned, its sensations bodiless.

Death, thought, noise: in T.O.M.B., these are so many apparitions of *nonevent*, of an imperceptible absencing of sense and sensation—the vast nothing on which events and occasions inscribe themselves as on a cosmic recording surface, transforming it in the direction of sense. Death, thought, and noise are not eternities but impunctuals: processes that coexist and find themselves entangled with their more differentiated counterparts—Life, punctuated by events; Idea, segmented according to Reason; Music, organized by measure, score, and scale.<sup>2</sup> T.O.M.B. renders this nothing sonically, explicitly, confrontationally, and with a dose of romantic idealization, not unlike the way Michaux renders it in text, not unlike the way the earth renders it in dirt and stone. Musically, in T.O.M.B., Black Metal strategies continually exceed themselves within the spaces drawn by the noise-work and are pushed to the point of absolute self-destruction, Black Metal wrenched violently out of itself and transformed into clashing waves of generative and degenerative forces—witness the transition and slippage across the opening one-third of *Macabre Noize Royale*, the act's most guitar-driven and conventionally "Black Metal" record, from the throbbing meltdown of electronic abuse and inhuman vocalization that is "The Inauguration" to the sludgy blastbeat-infused

Metal of “Immitis,” to the stiffer post-Industrial militarism of “Shaare Moth,” to the gritty piezoelectric destitution of “Brazen Endurance.” It is not, to borrow Timothy Morton’s phrase, “the frequency of the violence of existence” that T.O.M.B.’s sculptures embody<sup>3</sup> (though that is a good formula for much Black Metal), but the thundering groundlessness of being disclosed in the slowly yawning chasm of vacuity, the indifference so carefully curated by the orders of administered knowledge and managed risk, by a quantified world without danger or authentic mortality—neoliberal thanatocracy. Black Noise categorically rejects that hyperorganized, predetermined world bound up in its self-serving lies in favor of a dark, textured, finite cosmos incessantly perfecting the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of dying—geocide as work of art.



Figure 1.

François Laruelle rightly observes that “For common sense, and still for the philosophical regime, an image is an image-of. . . , a photo is a photo-of. . . ,”<sup>4</sup> and we may add that a sound is a sound-of. . . . Laruelle argues that *what* is photographed is never the visible representational content of the photo, but the non-philosophical One and, analogically, the ontological property of being-in-photo. Similarly, as we shall see, T.O.M.B.’s sound sculptures, which crystallize around analogue field recordings and found sounds, reflect or represent nothing, demolish reference, including auto-reference, instauring instead the Sonorous Irreflective: they are not *music* but experiments in *non-sonography*, the writing of noise, thought, and death.<sup>5</sup> While



Laruelle's philosophically and photographically inaccessible *One* remains a dubious proposition, T.O.M.B.'s sonographically-instituted irreflective imposes itself beyond question. By dis-locating place and object, T.O.M.B. reveals that place and object are inherently fractured, that each already contains its own outside, dramatically foregrounding their invisible fault-lines traversed by inapparent *occult magnitudes*, which are the true "subject-matter" or content of the works, the incorporeal attributes or the sonorous transformations, to which they give rise, in part by holding Black Metal compositionally in a relation of redundancy. Each manipulated fragment of sound, including the unevenly distributed grains of Black Metal and Death Industrial that inscribe T.O.M.B. in tangled lines of descent from Bathory and Celtic Frost, Mayhem and Watain, Emperor and Mortuus, NON and Monte Cazazza, perversely mirrors and encompasses the absent, mythical whole object from which it thus escapes in a dark monadology that outstrips orthodox philosophical reason, inviting a theorization that is as unabashedly speculative as T.O.M.B.'s own artistic production.

## II. GROTESQUE INDEXICALITY AND THE EXCARNATION OF PLACE

Ruins, abandoned relics of modernity, and dilapidated ossuaries are mines overflowing with unheard concrete music: semiotic catacombs, the raw materials of Black Noise. Indexicality is crucial to the effects T.O.M.B.'s compositions generate: the slip accompanying each physical disc identifies the locations tortured for their sonic goods in the making of the record, which can be read as a representational Wishartian gesture.<sup>6</sup> But the indexicality at work is neither direct nor linear; it is pathological, grotesque. The difference is that nothing escapes the curvature or the conditioning of the noise-work that the individual field recordings and ambient sound elements compose, so that the index retroactively ruins the origin or referent. *Grotesque indexicality* shatters reference and the pretense of reference, transforming the things and the objects that are ostensibly the *source* of the sounds into dynamic materials, haecceities of decay, disintegration, and rot, from which filthy sonorous creatures emerge like fattened maggots, parasites taking control of the host bodies on which they fed, becoming autonomous. This is a captive feedback process that undermines any claim to clear and distinct instrumentality, or any "reading" of the composition along the lines of a conventional studio production. Self-reference too becomes impossible, for though the autonomy of the work is real, it is never one; the work cannot be confused with the Idea or with a totality that mediates its parts. The work is precisely that which guarantees or directs its own movement, but not in the manner of the formula or the fixed code; it envelops a host of actions and utterances in a mode other than that of referentiality, and its autonomy is therefore also of another mode. How it does this probably can't be convincingly described analytically; we can only proceed by descending into the dungeon of the work itself with its grimy irregular pulsations,

bone-dry static whirrs, and menacing congeries of creaking metals, inhuman shrieks, and whining inorganic matter. But given the grotesque indexicality that distinguishes T.O.M.B., that descent begins with a basic construct that is at once present in virtually all T.O.M.B. recordings and that doubles as an analytical template: what I will call *the excarnation of place*.

Excarnation is the ritual practice of shucking bones. Also known as *defleshing*, the practice was, and is, essential to ancient mummification procedures used throughout the world and to the preservation of dead noble European bodies as late as the fourteenth century. Its practitioners developed an array of methods to more efficiently and more completely eliminate soft tissues, muscles, and cartilage: exposure to the elements or to the local wolves, scraping with stones or blades, boiling. A secondary meaning of excarnation is theological or doctrinal. Here, the term trades on the value the Church has invested in its opposite, *incarnation*, and refers specifically to the Gnostic refusal of the doctrine of the Word Made Flesh. A further signification is poetical: in the register of art, excarnation captures the (always embodied) process of dematerialization, the abstraction or extraction of some expressive element from a raw material. Excarnation plays an indispensable role in the realization of art because it at once supplies a connection to lived reality and to the material conditions of the work's existence (the universe of perception, emotion, endeavor, and action) while decisively severing the realm of the work from all others (the autonomous zone of percepts, affects, sonorous figures, anonymous forces). The independence of the work depends, itself, upon the techniques devised to achieve excarnation.

Excarnation is never complete, but its failures, incompletions, and imperfections are precisely the means by which the work acquires its character. Tendrils of all sorts come creeping back in. Every work of art surrounds itself with a void. But the void turns out to be a competent conductor of errant transmissions from beyond the work's hermetic horizon: the work as dark body maniacally absorbing all emissions.

There is a fourth register that is especially important for sound art, and it can be called geographical. Noise is spatial music<sup>7</sup>—first by mere derivation, as it descends from the re-evaluation of ambient urban “noises” in Russolo and the use of found sounds and magnetic tape in Edgard Varèse, John Cage, and others, but more importantly by unfolding shifting territories that elude capture in formalizable units. Early noise-works—those of Varèse chief among them—plot the grounds with dynamic intersections, surprising coalescences, and parabolic curves that play on the discursive expectations and codes of listening complicit with the musical establishment: a kind of formalist anti-formalism. The sirens and the whips (Schopenhauer's bane<sup>8</sup>) are to be experienced *as* sirens and whips: intrusive and unusual, but of no slighter stature than the bass drum or the cello. In Black Noise—in T.O.M.B., at least—the forms are unrecognizable and actively resist recognition, and the sources are wholly drawn into the plane of the work.

Concrete (non-synthesized) elements are responsible for laying out this plane; the place speaks through the work. In turn, the work desecrates the place. None of the field recording sites are chosen for their neutrality. The asylums and prisons were sites of unspeakable suffering for unfortunate inmates on a daily basis; the mausoleums and crypts are freighted with religious solemnity and Christian ideals of reverence for the dead, in addition to being occult spiritual portals; others are significant for attracting irredeemably lost souls seeking that point in space where they may breathe their last—not unlike Throbbing Gristle’s choice of Beachy Head (near Brighton), to reflect the oblique thread of darkness running through *20 Jazz Funk Greats*. T.O.M.B. ritualistically channels these negatively charged energies, exaggerating them, amplifying them until they saturate sonic space. Imperceptible in themselves, these energies are occult magnitudes, spectral or memorial forces that have, paradoxically, left no positive trace in any particular object, but which become detectable through the excarnation of place. All-consuming, unlocked, released from spatiotemporal boundaries, they blacken the horizon. Cracking open to release a chaos of clamoring magnitudes, the solemn, sacred place becomes a blasphemous *black site* thundering below the surface of sense.

The excarnation of place also proceeds through the profanation and deterritorialization of objects (a gravestone becomes a drumhead, a crypt door becomes a gong). One writer recently observed, enigmatically, that, “For music, a cadaver is a useful tool. . . .”<sup>9</sup> T.O.M.B.’s “Cadaver Transmissions” (*UAG*) concurs in a strikingly literal



Figure 2.

way; that recording uses sounds found through the aggressive application of contact microphones to a corpse.<sup>10</sup> This technique creates a sound that is at once extremely alienating—mostly at a conceptual level—and supremely intimate, like a dream in which size and scale, the near and the far, are dramatically altered with respect to how they are ordinarily perceived in waking life. The powerful amplification of small sounds (such as those that show up in documentaries about insect culture) here joins forces with the aerobic utterance of human death against a black-grey ambient horizon reminiscent of hard, dead leaves falling from trees. The rustling is a material trace of the corpse, of death incarnate, and yet the composition stands against its empirical source material, independent and infinitely more complex, offering a stratified sonorous body swept by dark winds. The field recordings make the work possible but take off on unforeseeable tangents, accumulating layers as their sonic properties are broken apart and stitched back together in new configurations. Exarnation creates monsters.

T.O.M.B.'s works create black sites by repeating places and objects charged with inaudible psychic energies, saturated with memories and laden with religious or ritual significance, and thus by feeding place back into itself, “jamming” the system of signs that furnishes its cultural, social, political, or other value—not to mention the system of signs known as Black Metal, for which place (in the sense of geographic and cultural origin) remains, somewhat frustratingly, of paramount importance. This demented repetition is engineered to strip away the *flesh* of the place—the phenomenological value of the place—leaving only the pulsating occult magnitudes of trauma, suffering, death, reprocessed and reactualized. Black sites do not represent places, therefore; they disable any economy of resemblance and similarity and so preclude the establishment of meaningful correspondences, the building blocks of representational meaning. Indeed, they have no correspondence or correlation with any place as such, but constitute new, autonomous territories of sound founded on echoes of depravity. In T.O.M.B., a whole cascade of profane mediations carries place into territory—and these alone compose the work. The sonorous territory, the black site, is the dislocation of place—a crack in the real, through which the void appears as such.

### III. CRYPTOLOGY—OF THE SONOROUS IRREFLECTIVE

Where Black Metal depends on a species of conflict resolution and dramatic closure—even if in an inverted arc that resists Pop, Rock, and Classical forms—Black Noise can seem to radically depopulate its sonorous territories and deindividuate its (non)musical beings, creating pure flows. Although this is misleading, it is beyond doubt that there is an “I” in Black Metal, and a “you,” and a series of more or less well-defined character elements (demonic, occult, magickal, mythological, etc., in lyrics and in image), not to mention quests, problems, and goals. Musically, the smoldering, flattened lo-fi chaos of Black Metal gives rise to a repeatable set of vectors that become familiar, expected as



generic tropes, even mandatory to qualify the work as “Black Metal,” and these become the stable framework within which the real work—the innovation—unfolds.<sup>11</sup> Crassly, this threshold is the point at which a constraining medium (Black Metal) becomes a restrictive genre (“Black Metal”): the *scabbing point*, where singalong refrains, rhythm structures, and formalized measures or standardized phases appear en masse, displacing or subduing the alien sound masses that resist interpretation and cut deeply into the ossified flesh of musical structure. The musical beings that inhabit this forsaken territory (to say nothing of the lyrical element) threaten to turn the world upside down, raising annihilation and extinction to the level of final principles, while at the same time enforcing existing standards of music; no work recognizable as Black Metal fails to perform this paradox to some degree, and virtually no one fails to see in Black Metal the profound conservatism that marks the scabbing point in its regime of expression.<sup>12</sup>

The sonorous beings that surface in T.O.M.B. are of a different nature because the dimension of closure is terrifyingly absent. An entirely different psychogeography is at play. A piece composed using amplified blood flows, “Blood Vortex” (*UAG*), makes this clear in its very title. The piece is generated by pure vortical figures that at once resist identification or distinction, and assert their irreducibility to one another. They move in thick syrupy waves, drawing a viscous immobilizing territory, a swamp or pit of quicksand that disables in advance the imposition of teleological semiotic matrices: there are many speeds but no definite direction, certainly nothing resembling a message or goal. The vortices differentiate themselves only dromologically. Layers pile upon layers until an immense vascular zone of intensity fills all space—pure variation as absolute stillness. “Electric Exorcism” and “Vulgarity” (*Third Wave Holocaust*) define similar de-differentiated, de-individuated, droning vortical figures, but these create composite entities that haunt space—misanthropic frequency specters—rather than the unnamable fluid forces of “Blood Vortex,” which consume it. The fluent vortices of “Blood Vortex” establish a cumulative distribution where nothing fades and a host of entities run together, while the spectral beings of *Third Wave Holocaust* define a system of proximities constituted by patchwork assemblages generating sonic friction.

Despite superficial similarities, then, the consumptive-cumulative order distinguishes itself fully from the mechano-composite order. Moreover, the figures engendered to shape these orders and to rigorously specify them are entirely different: the variable speeds of “Blood Vortex” are defined by their relativity, whereas the frequency specters of “Electric Exorcism” and “Vulgarity” assert a shrieking necessity, trapped in the endless feedback loops they have constructed. Indeed, hollow fragments of what may have once been a conventional Black Metal song can be detected deep within the spectral prisms of “Electric Exorcism,” but it remains strictly impossible to determine whether these remnants are in fact remnants or, rather, artifacts borne of the parasitic autonomy of the loop. In this way, T.O.M.B. forces Black Metal into

redundancy to leverage its power in new relations to the immanent variables of sound, revealing, for instance, the drone lingering passively or the indestructible microparticles coalescing in every flash of the blastbeat.



Figure 3.

Much of T.O.M.B.'s corpus is made up of beat- and guitar-driven works with a vocal element, and these are of no less interest. Rapid-fire drums meet with environmental percussive experimentation, blazing tremolo picking, and open strumming; and sustained atmospheric riffing accompanies layers of static fuzz and Cold Meat-style Power-Electronic synthesis while occasionally intelligible words take shape amidst screeching contentless utterances, indecipherable growls, cries, wails, and ritual incantations ("Na La Gore Na," *Third Wave Holocaust*), such that all vocalization degenerates into anonymous and subjectless Sayings drifting across the plane of sound. The total fusion of Black Metal and Noise reflected in T.O.M.B.'s corpus, but especially in the act's earlier material, surfaces in these forbidden conjunctions.

Still, the heavy distortion, synthesis, and concrete sound elements foreign to Black Metal do not act as a simple repository or container for the latter, as though it would be possible, in theory, to withdraw the Black Metal cut from its noisy environs. Instead, as pieces like "Black Crypt Worship" (*Total Occultic Mechanical Blasphemy II*) or "Immitis" (*Macabre Noize Royale*) show, Black Metal not only mingles with other forces but is absorbed without remainder in the dark concrescence of the noise-work: this is what we

have meant by the organization of *redundancy* that characterizes the inscription of Black Metal. It enjoys no privilege over any other element and attains a state of suspension and even diminution. Indeed, it is made to enjoy its own subjection to the unheard. Black Noise is Black Metal's own act of perishing. To detect the limits of Black Metal—in the way that Marquis de Sade detects the limits of Law or the way contemporary performance artists interrogate liberal values of tolerance and openness—T.O.M.B. moves beyond any possible generic stricture, not merely sinking Black Metal's rhythmic, timbral, melodic, and harmonic values in a vat of acid, but doing so in a way that renders them complicit in their own syntactic undoing.

We have already explored how T.O.M.B.'s non-sonography ruins referentiality and generates blasphemous black sites that reflect nothing and resist recognition. It is this dis-location of place and object—whether mausoleum or corpse, low-frequency oscillation or blastbeat—that compels materiality to betray its secrets and offer them on the altar of sound. These immemorial echoes of the damned, which we call occult magnitudes, only find expression in the accomplished noise-work. They say (the) nothing and therefore require their own asemiotic: a cryptology of the Sonorous Irreflective.

The dead and the dying, the undead and the inorganic, all continue to act: contracted into the bodies and the ecologies of the living, their activity is corrosion, decomposition, degeneration. This is no positivist doctrine: one would search in vain for a measurable or quantifiable trace of this action as such, that is, a trace capable of standing in for the totality of the dead. The noise-work alone provides the axis of transformation along which they may slide from anonymous indeterminate immensity to sonorous figuration. In T.O.M.B., such sonorous beings contract and dilate, coalesce and diverge, swerve and intersect, fortify one another by building dense strata of silence and sound, fleeting atoms and swelling crystals of noise—crystallizations locking undeveloped sonic fragments into static relations with one another, iterable yet perpetually just shy of any fixed meaning.

There is no question of *detecting* these occult magnitudes, as though a sufficiently sensitive instrument could register their vacillations independently of their material entombments. It is the accomplished noise-work itself, as a place or a thing excarnate, that provides a habitation for them and retrojects its own unworldly cartography onto that of the programmed world from which it becomes unhinged. By raising the imperceptible to perception, the non-sonorous to sonority—not through fantasy or virtuosity but through the ritual solicitation and conjuration of perfectly real nonhuman entities—T.O.M.B. decisively breaks with both contradictory prongs of the post-secular metaphysics governing existence in the contemporary West: matter-of-fact scientism and the fascination for the sublime. T.O.M.B. proclaims, or enacts, an occult panpsychism premised on the radical equivalence of death, thought, and noise.

Its object is the indocility of thought to human reason. To de-anthropocentrize thought, it is not enough to extend the organic sensorium to the realm of the inorganic. Vitalism is the irredeemable ideology of the neoliberal thanatocracy that it derides. It strengthens the bond of organic perception and, with its transcendental apparatus, enforces the domestication of thought. Life, in the vitalist's sense, is the mere *ministration* of experience—monitored, incentivized, measured and (crucially) delimited by the vision of the philosopher, who is rendered bookkeeper of the vital flows. Things, on this account, are temporary stand-ins for the permanent oscillation of life, actual incarnations of virtual events, traces, the Word Made Flesh. Here is an antivitalist metaphysical formula that we can support: Bodies conduct thought, and die.

T.O.M.B.'s occult panpsychism stands opposed to this sort of vitalism. It promotes an ethos of active perishing: the art of dying. The grotesque semiology of shattered reference, the excarnation of place and object, and the metaphysic of the Sonorous Irreflective (to take only the three signature elements questioned here) all attest to this. Each disrupts presentational immediacy and undoes, rather than extends, the organic sensorium; each radically abolishes the fetish of the trace; each contributes to the instauration of sinister occult magnitudes, decisively crossing the threshold into the merest registers of the inorganic, of raw nonevent. The habit of conflating panpsychism and vitalism is prevalent, perhaps unavoidable, but certainly erroneous. Psychomorphs, ubiquitous but always in decline, perpetually perishing, have nothing to do with transcendental life. Their relentlessly disintegrating ecologies belie the vitalist investment in the pure duration of life. They live death; they inhabit noise.

The becoming-sonorous of what we should not hesitate to call T.O.M.B.'s spiritual reverberations, no less than the Scream on the lips of Edvard Munch's figure or the Sear blazing through Nietzsche's addled head, raise death to the power of the Ultimate: a *cryptology* that entails no bringing-to-light but, on the contrary, a *burial of the apparent* in the impenetrable mists of oblivion. A blasphemous ontology of the concrete that makes things alien, mysterious, even mystical, yet annuls the distance so carefully cultivated by Kantianism and the phenomenological tradition, forcing a confrontation with the non-place of the common, of the static of the universe: the nothing-in-common. T.O.M.B.'s cryptological studies are occult transmissions of antinormative, gnostic psychomorphs—and herein lies the opaque political element coursing through this corpus.

#### IV. NOISE ECOLOGIES

All theological concepts are sacralized ecological concepts. God the Creator begat the omnipotent State, but the Climate, *ens modernissimus*, is their common progenitor and descendant. If political concepts are secularized theological concepts, some care should be taken in charting the discursive shifts and historical reversals defining the politics-



theology-ecology knot, not least because our present would seem to be bound up in the reassertion of ecology—not, for once, as theology (*Deus sive natura*), but as politics (*Rex sive natura*), and maybe soon, most implausibly, as itself.<sup>13</sup>

Nothing in T.O.M.B. or Black Noise, generally, can be mistaken for a political utterance. Politics is a cloud of vapor that suffuses the noise-work: unlike the positioning and posturing that accompanies much Black Metal, the political element in Black Noise is an indistinct wind nested within a maelstrom. No manifesto or proclamation sounds, yet the unlocking of sonority, the cartography of non-sonorous psychomorphs, and the cryptological sacrifice of materiality is not without political value. Not a politics of interests or ideas or power, even in the broadest sense, but the politics of the elemental vibration of the cosmos, which nevertheless does not transcend the work but lies enigmatically within, at the absolute minimum of amplitude.

The simplistic narrative according to which the musicalization of noise parallels the political integration of community (advanced most famously by Jacques Attali) does not withstand scrutiny. Both musicalization and integration are dying gasps of an archaism. Music, by polishing and repackaging noise in saleable forms, certainly “grows,” “evolves,” “matures,” but only according to its own standards; the same is true of integration and communal harmony, which develop only by exorcising the demons of non-conformity. That such exorcism consists not in rejecting the inconsistent, but in adapting the metric of consistency to accommodate the latter, does not change this analysis, because the only value of the inconsistent as such is, of course, its inconsistency. Musicalization and integration are strategies in the cosmic war of attrition between (vitalist) life and (panpsychist) death; indices of the perishing of the particular social organization reflected in the art and the ideologies generated.

Enclaves—exclusive and elitist in their own ways—inevitably form as a practice of intellectual and cultural resistance to the appropriation implied by the flourishing of political integration. Community subsists only within such resistance. Philosophical constructs of community as being-with often fail to apprehend this element of inversion: negation—including the negation that is noise—is only the addition of a counter-tendency to the driving forces of homogenization, and is just as “positive,” or constructive, as the latter. It is not enough to supplement the fundamental individualism presupposed by *Mitsein* with an appeal to a constitutive outside; with nothing-in-common, even the progressive logics of exteriorization and alterity lose all meaning.<sup>14</sup> Further: community disappears the moment it adopts a view of itself as anything other than a corrosive force within a dying colony. In a forgotten text that continues to haunt phenomenological accounts, Josiah Royce argued that community exists only where each member can affirm, “This activity which we perform together, this work of ours, its past, its future, its sequence, its order, its sense—all these enter into my life, and are the life of my own self writ large.”<sup>15</sup> Royce utters the silent condition

of both Hegelian and Heideggerian philosophers of community. Instead, however, what is essential is the twofold movement of, first, de-individuation, the malfunction and breakdown of the logics of identity and resemblance, even of “my own self,” defining the non-place of the common as death, thought, or noise, followed by the collective figuration of anonymous forces. Ethics corresponds to the first, politics to the second. The political and the ethical challenge of noise is not to undermine or overthrow the processes of political integration, harmonization, and hegemonization, or to engineer shifts in power, nor to passively watch the palaces burn, but to become worthy of the vacuity of being. It is thus also the ecological prospect of noise to affirm geocide—not, in a kind of confused, post-romantic nihilism or sci-fi extinctionism, as an end to be sought, but as a realistic condition defining any possible community. In that way, geocide opens onto geodicy, as the defense of the earth’s right to die—*not* at the hands of a small, privileged portion of humanity and its greatest geoprocessing machine, capitalism, but in accordance with the exhaustion of nonhuman thought.



Figure 4.

#### NOTES

All images within this essay by Adrian Warner, 2014, courtesy of the artist.

<sup>1</sup> Paul Hegarty’s universally lauded study *Noise/Music: A History* (Continuum, 2007) endorses a variant of this ethic (see 197–200), which is associated with experimental musician Pauline Oliveros and has been endorsed by several others, such as Stephen O’Malley of Sunn O))). A similar line of idealist

thinking is developed in Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (Continuum, 2010), with emphasis on the subjectivity of sound art and the constructive function of fantasy. For a set of thoughtful reflections on the aesthetic, ethical, and political implications of different ways of listening in the specific context of Industrial music's mobilization of noise, see S. Alexander Reed, *Assimilate: A Critical History of Industrial Music* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 305–319. Reed does not argue for any particular ethic of listening, but contends that the deployment of noise in (Industrial) music should be understood not as an attempt at “confounding the conscious mind” but “submerging it” (309), a metaphor that, as a description of what happens to “the conscious mind,” casually places his thought in this current. This point winds up supporting his argument against avant-garde elitism (which, in unflaggingly controverting establishment modes of thought, in his view damns the artist to ineffectuality) and in favor of a degree of assimilation, or musicalization (widening the horizons of the musical mainstream), as a necessary step along the way to Industrial music's (fantasized) revolution. These points are related to the ethic of deep listening, which claims to have a political dimension, and I address their substance in the last part of this paper, though without specifically engaging Reed's line of argument. A mode of listening that runs partly counter to the depth school is elaborated in Joanna Demers, *Listening through the Noise: The Aesthetics of Experimental Electronic Music* (Oxford University Press, 2010), which, on the basis of its convincing argument that Electronic music broadly conceived (from *musique concrète* to Acid House and commercial Electronica to Drone, field recording, Noise, and sound art) has succeeded in breaking down the “frame” through which music is consumed, considered, and produced, advocates what its author calls “aesthetic listening.” Aesthetic listening rewards the meditative nirvana-hunting, Oliveros-inspired practices as well as more intermittent exposure, while insisting on the aestheticity and thus the specificity of the artwork in its distinction from non-music (which, thanks to the dissolution of the frame, it now more easily melts into). But for Demers, who invests heavily in the cognitive and perceptual mechanics of listening, this specificity derives from the agency of the listener, rendering aesthetic listening a new, more rarefied brand of fantasmatic engagement with sound.

<sup>2</sup> Death is not an event. For a contrary perspective, see Tristan Garcia, *Form and Object: A Treatise on Things*, trans. Mark Allan Ohm and Jon Cogburn (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 412.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Morton, “At the Edge of the Smoking Pool of Death: Wolves in the Throne Room,” *Helvetia* 1 (2013): 24.

<sup>4</sup> François Laruelle, *The Concept of Non-Photography*, trans. Robin Mackay (Sequence / Urbanomic, 2011), 46.

<sup>5</sup> *Sonor* in Latin, from which sonography derives, is noise or sound.

<sup>6</sup> Trevor Wishart, English composer and sound theorist, is known, justly or otherwise, for his insistence on the traceability of sound sources despite, or more often through, immense analogue and digital transformations. His notion of “masking,” for example—to say nothing of his conception of “transformation” itself—trades on the problem of identifying sound sources in their presentational immediacy, even as it calls for the imposition of ever more heavily coded distortion matrices. The reference in the text above to Wishart relies on the composer's association with indexicality as a musicological theme.

<sup>7</sup> On spatial music see Edgard Varèse, “Spatial Music,” in *Contemporary Composers on Contemporary Music*, eds. Elliott Schwartz and Barney Childs, (Da Capo, 1998), 204–207. See also Gilles Deleuze, “Occupy without Counting: Proust, Boulez, and Time,” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975–1995* (Semiotext(e), 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, "On Noise," in *Studies in Pessimism*, trans. and ed. T.B. Saunders (Macmillan, 1908), 127–133.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Montroso, "Human," in *Inhuman Nature*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Oliphaunt, 2014), 59.

<sup>10</sup> No One provides background in an interview: "This ['Cadaver Transmissions'] was the first recording session completed using a 'corpse' as an instrument. I was able to obtain access to a morgue for a certain period of time and used certain recording tactics against the cadaver, in a very aggressive, 'spell' like fashion. The ability to conduct this recording confirmed the project's true intentions of actually using death as a means to create music." Kez Whelan, "Terrorizer Speaks to T.O.M.B.'s No One," *Terrorizer.com* (August 28, 2014), <http://www.terrorizer.com/news/features-2/terrorizer-speaks-t-o-m-b-s-one>.

<sup>11</sup> Aside from the pages of this journal, a definitive statement of Black Metal's status as a progressive or experimental medium is *Black Metal: Beyond the Darkness*, eds. Louis Pattison, Nick Richardson, and Brandon Stosuy (Black Dog, 2012), which catalogues recent innovations in Black Metal by drawing attention toward under-represented Black Metal cultures outside of Northern Europe. However, the most striking recent work is that which has been done on Black Metal's imbrication with ecology, politics, and religion; see, for example *Melancology: Black Metal Theory and Ecology*, ed. Scott Wilson (Zero, 2014).

<sup>12</sup> It goes without saying that this conservatism has little to do with the reactionary positive politics of any particular practitioner of Black Metal; instead, it suffuses the genre as such and places concrete limits on Black Metal experimentation, only indirectly grounding the nationalism and heathenism associated with Black Metallists. But I think it has everything to do with the rejection of Black Noise in most Black Metal circles.

<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, theory should demand more of this relationship than what is afforded by the "narrow aperture of science's unthought," in Wilson's formulation ("Introduction to Melancology"), which seems to grant scientific truths an extensity unwarranted by the fragile chains of reference that constitute facticity. Generally, Black Metal theory, like other speculative theoretical practices, remains too much in thrall to an indefensible set of ontological commitments inherited from twentieth century philosophy of science. This essay has attempted to offer an alternative viewpoint capable of registering the agency of a multitude of beings without regard to their epistemological credentials.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Roberto Esposito, "Nihilism and Community," in *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford University Press, 2010), 137–138.

<sup>15</sup> *The Problem of Christianity, Vol. II: The Real World and the Christian Ideas* (Macmillan, 1913), 86.





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